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Othering

An Analysis of Expression in Hip-Hop and South Asian
Literature Through Post-9/11 Discourse

Written by Tareq Alam

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Introduction

Muslim identity and the “othering” of Muslim people reached a point of crisis in the period immediately following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. This project will examine how artistic expression of Muslim identity played a role in a post-9/11 anti-Muslim context. The artistic expression will consist of several works of hip-hop and South Asian literature that put identity politics at the forefront of their expression. This project will address hip-hop and South Asian literature’s approach to Muslim identity in the post 9/11 era and, conversely, how these media attempt to eliminate anti-Muslim sentiments during the same period. With respect to hip-hop, specifically, this project will analyze how artists attend to anti-Muslim sentiment through their music. Moreover, special attention will be paid to a selection of hip-hop artists who find themselves to be “others” in society, that is, those who find themselves at a disadvantage as a consequence of their race and background. With regard to South Asian literature, this project will examine a selection of fictional pieces focused on Muslim identity politics, with the ultimate purpose of understanding how artists address these issues through writing rather than music. In culmination, this project will then compare the approaches of hip-hop artists and writers in an attempt to understand how anti-Muslim sentiment has changed over time and across two selected media.

Before addressing these issues, a clear understanding of what it means to be *othered* must be developed. There are many ways to define the other, however the following definition will be used as the basis for argument. In the *International Encyclopedia for Human Geography*, Jean-Francois Staszak provides an in-depth definition of other and otherness. Staszak begins by stating that:

Otherness is the result of a discursive process by which a dominant in-group ('Us,' the Self) constructs one or many dominated out-groups ('Them,' Other) by stigmatizing a difference – real or imagined – presented as a negation identity and thus a motive for potential discrimination. (Staszak 2)

This is not to say that otherness and difference maintain the same definition. Otherness develops through the form of “discourse” whereas difference emerges through “fact.” For example, Staszak explains: “gender is otherness” and “biological sex is difference” (2). He further elaborates on the process of othering, stating that:

“The out-group is only coherent as a group as a result of its opposition to the in-group and its lack of identity. This lack is based upon stereotypes that are largely stigmatizing and obviously simplistic. The in-group constructs one or more others, setting itself apart and giving itself an identity. Otherness and identity are two inseparable sides of the same coin. The other only exists relative to the Self, and vice versa” (2)

In short, the Self uses the other as a point of comparison in order to develop their identity. As a result of the Self's ability to dictate what is and what is not, they are more often than not seen as superior to the other. The idea of superiority manifests through the social majority, and those who do not fit with the majoritarian ideal of the Self are *othered by the majority group*.

Consequently, this majority mindset is likely to discriminate against those who do not fit in on their terms by excluding them from society or by working, consciously or unconsciously to subjugate the other to the majoritarian Self. The other becomes vulnerable to discrimination, whether it be directed at their race, religion, sexuality, or anything else that the majority does not exhibit themselves. How the other is supposed to respond, both internally and externally, to this discrimination, becomes crucial to answer.

Responding to and overcoming discrimination is not a simple task, especially when living in a nation where citizens' beliefs are apt to change situationally. Following the attacks on 9/11, the United States saw a rapidly growing sense of anti-Muslim sentiment that negatively affected the country's own people. Data compiled by the FBI shows that hate crime incidents against Muslims had skyrocketed from 28 to 481 incidents in 2001 following the attacks (Ser). Because of this increase in hate crimes, othering was an inescapable reality for most Muslims, and most of their options lacked a desired outcome. For one, Muslims could continue to express and represent their Muslim identity while still in the United States, but that would risk continued discrimination and social exile. Another option was to assimilate themselves into the culture of America driven by the social majority, but only at the cost of their own identity. Lastly, Muslims faced the possibility of leaving their home in pure avoidance of discrimination and assimilation, but this results in a loss of reason as to why they or their family came to the United States on the first place. Given this morass of bad options, this project aims to understand how socially othered people approach these options in an attempt to eliminate discrimination.

In order to understand the extent of this discrimination and how those who have been othered by the majority culture have responded to it, this project will analyze five different works that express the distress caused by social and cultural othering. Three of these works are hip-hop songs: "Cops Shot the Kid" by Nas (2018), "Flag Shopping" by Heems (2015), and "Patriot Act" by Heems (2015). These three pieces will allow for a dissection of both the lyrical and musical aspects of each song in order to construct a better understanding of the perspective and expression of the artists' experience with othering. Following this section on hip-hop analysis are two other works that will represent the literature side of the analysis: a novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid, and a play, *Disgraced* by Ayad Akhtar. This section will

address themes and emotional expressions of the other, focusing on the experience of discrimination and assimilation in a post-9/11 America. This will lead to a comparative analysis of all five works that details different artistic expressions of those who have been othered with the goal of profiling the present state of otherness and belonging for the Muslim community in a post-9/11 America. More specifically, this section will discuss othering and belonging through the expressed topics of self-identity, nationalism, and a social urgency for assimilation into American culture that results in the project's close.

Chapter 1

Hip Hop, Muslim Identity, and Othering in Post-9/11 America

Hip Hop Introduction

In order to adequately address hip hop in the context of a post-9/11 America, one must first understand how hip hop operates within African American culture and how it acts as a societal vehicle projecting the voices of the marginalized. Hip hop has historically been cast down as a genre that boasts gang violence, the mistreatment of women, and the usage of recreational drugs. In Tricia Rose's *The Hip Hop Wars*, Rose inserts a quotation from Reverend Calvin O. Butts III, a pastor and university president, who says, "Unless we speak against this [rap music] it will creep continuously into our society and destroy the morals of our young people" (Rose 95). This viewpoint fails to differentiate between commercialized hip-hop, which has been apt to exploit young Black Americans, and the vast array of styles and subgenres that exist within hip-hop. This kind of generalization risks the continued marginalization of voices that are already unheard. Considering this suppression of voices in hip hop, Tricia Rose's *Black Noise* attempts to answer the question of whether or not this genre "can set the stage for political mobilization" (Rose 1). She points out that "news media attention on rap seems fixated on instances of violence at rap concerts, rap producers' illegal use of musical samples, gangsta raps' lurid fantasies of cop killing and female dismemberment, and black nationalist rappers' suggestions that white people are the devil's disciples" (Rose 1). If this is the case for how news outlets address hip hop, it does not seem possible for the genre to be taken seriously as something that can deliver a positive output of political commentary. With this, it is the job for critics involved in the musical and cultural scene of hip hop to highlight the genre's role in society that news media outlets fail to properly discuss.

Rose addresses this need for critics to speak about hip hop's positive role in society, and writes:

Music and cultural critics praise rap's role as an educational tool, point out that black women rappers are rare examples of aggressive pro-women lyricists in popular music, and defend rap's ghetto stories as real-life reflections that should draw attention to the burning problems of racism and economic oppression, rather than to questions of obscenity. (Rose 1)

If these "ghetto stories" were to be listened to with the purpose of learning about black American culture rather than criticizing it, the "burning problems of racism and economic oppression" can be more thoughtfully addressed within mainstream media. When thinking about the most purposeful way to get their marginalized voices heard by the majority, rappers must figure out how to make music accessible to more than just their own culture and community. More specifically, rappers must develop a way to have their voices heard by the majority of America. Rose confronts this idea, writing:

Rap's black cultural address and its focus on marginal identities may appear to be in opposition to its crossover appeal for people from different racial or ethnic groups and social positions. How can this black public dialogue speak to the thousands of young white suburban boys and girls who are critical to the record sales successes of many of rap's more prominent stars? How can I suggest that rap is committed culturally and emotionally to the pulse, pleasures, and problems of black urban life in the face of such diverse constituencies? (Rose 4)

The need to vocalize cultural, societal, and internal struggles within the realm of rap then becomes at odds with its white listeners. How can the art maintain its authenticity while

concurrently crafting it in such a way that appeals to a much larger audience? And on the same point, how can artists know for sure that this larger audience is actually dissecting the content of the music rather than focusing on its replay value? Hip hop is both musically and lyrically influenced by the artist's "identity and location," so it seems unlikely that a white listener from the suburbs of Connecticut, for example, could properly understand and relate to the message being conveyed in the music (Rose 10). It is this cultural divide that places the responsibility on hip hop artists to use their creative platform in such a way that attracts the attention of people from all backgrounds and that emphasizes the importance of unheard voices and their place in society.

Once hip hop artists develop their creative platform in a way that promotes widespread accessibility while maintaining a cultural and societal authenticity, there is a lot that can be learned by audiences who do not fit the artists' own demographic. The mastery of this creative platform, for example, can give a teenage white boy from Connecticut a deep, personal perspective on the "experiences of racial marginality in America" endured by the hip hop artists they indulge themselves in. From here, hip hop can begin to educate the societal majority on the issues they face as others in America. Rose details a range of topics that surround the personal struggles of the hip hop artists who find themselves in the category of the other, writing that the genre "is the central cultural vehicle for open social reflection on poverty, fear of adulthood, the desire for absent fathers, frustrations about black male sexism, female sexual desires, daily rituals of life as an unemployed teen hustler, safe sex, raw anger, violence, and childhood memories" (Rose 18). While this seems like a wide range of topics, the extent to which hip hop artists address such issues allows for other artists who are not black to feel comfortable enough to create music that vocalizes their own culture's struggles. Black artists effectively set the

standard for how marginalization is accessibly fused into their music, ultimately providing artists from other backgrounds, such as South Asian Americans, with the groundwork for how to talk about their place in society in a scope that reaches the majority.

Cops Shot the Kid Introduction

In June of 2018, hip hop veteran Nas released *NASIR*, with music production provided by Kanye West. Track two, titled “Cops Shot the Kid” features West and details the ongoing clash between the police and African-Americans. A few months before the release of this album, on March 18th, 2018, Stephon Clark was shot dead in Sacramento by the police on March 18 after law enforcement misinterpreted Clark’s cellphone for a gun. The unrightful murder of a Black men resulted in civil unrest lead by the Black Lives Matter movement, with the Sacramento Kings NBA team showing their support by having Clark’s name on the back of their jerseys (Nathan). This was just one of many wrongful killings of black Americans by the police in recent times, and it was time for voices in hip hop to take a stand and project their disgust with the current social environment. Even after the conviction of Officer Derek Chauvin, who was found guilty of murdering George Floyd through excessive force, a New York Times article titled “The Death of George Floyd Reignited a Movement: What Happens Now?” states that, “For many Black Americans, real change feels elusive, particularly given how relentlessly the killing of Black men by the police has continued” (Audra). While rappers across the country voiced the Black community’s need for justice on these issues, none was more important than the voice of Nas. A veteran to the hip hop scene and an influence to just about any hip hop artist, Nas was the artist that the community needed to project their cries on a worldwide scale. He does just so on “Cops Shot the Kid”.

“Cops Shot the Kid” Lyrical Analysis

“Cop Shot the Kid” opens with an excerpt from Richard Pryor’s 1971 standup album *Craps (After Hours)* that expresses Pryor’s frustration with being Black in a community where police discriminatorily overused their power. Pryor begins by recalling the atmosphere of his neighborhood and the attitude of the police towards it, saying, “The cops used to come around in my neighborhood / ‘Alright, you kids, stop having so much fun, move along!’ / Oh they’d arrest me ...” (Nas 0:00-0:05). Although 1971 seems far removed from 2018 in terms of the passing of time, Nas found the attitude towards Black Americans had not changed significantly in the intervening years. In a neighborhood where children were outside having fun, the police still found a way to feel threatened by them. The sample of Pryor’s standup bit ends with, “And you’d be trying to get home ... / And they’d always catch you out in front of a store or something / ... / Cops, ‘Ree, put your hands up, black boy!’” (0:10-0:19). The depiction of a wrongful arrest is immediately followed by the looped sample of Slick Rick’s “Children Story” in which he raps the song’s title, “The cops shot the kid” (0:20).

As Nas begins his verse, he raps, “The cop shot the kid, same old scene” (0:39). In making clear that this sort of event is nothing more than the “same old scene,” Nas exerts an underlying frustration with the commonality of such murders. He is not surprised by it and by using the phrase “same old,” he implies that the Black community is fully aware of the unchanged status of their people in American culture. Moreover, Nas develops a scene of neighborhood kids that feels ominously reminiscent of Pryor’s description from 1971, rapping, “Slap-boxin’ in the street / Crack the hydrant in the heat / Cop cars on the creep” (0:45-0:50). Almost fifty years later and Nas still sees no difference in the divide between Black communities and the cops that survey the area – the police are threatened by a persistent characterization of

Blacks as troublesome in the media that is non-existent in a neighborhood full of children having fun outside. Following these lines, Nas raps about the strengths of black communities and those who pit against them, saying, “Together we be strong, but forever we divide” (1:00). The two instances of “we” in this line do not refer to the same grouping of people, but rather the Black communities that are together, and the country as a whole that fails to keep this togetherness intact.

In a nonchalant way, Nas sets up the rest of his verse by rapping, “So y’all are blowin’ my high / Type of shit that’s killin’ my vibe” (1:03). The proceeding lines directly attack the current societal issues faced by blacks. He raps about the indifference from cops towards white criminals and imposes the double standard of attitudes towards blacks with “White kids are brought in alive / Black kids get hit with like five” (1:07). Here, the “five” Nas refers to is a double entendre, representing a guilty verdict that results in five years in prison, and a child who has been shot five times. Nas then ends his verse with, “

Get scared, you panic, you’re goin’ down / The disadvantages of the brown / How in the hell the parents gon’ bury their own kids / Not the other way around? / Reminds me of Emmett Till / Let’s remind ‘em why Kap kneels. (1:12-1:25)

By referencing Emmett Till, an African American boy who was lynched in Mississippi in 1955 after being accused of harassing a white woman, Nas continues the theme that nothing has changed over the course of the years with the wrongful treatment of Blacks (History.com). In this case, he uses the death of Emmett Till to explain the panic of Blacks when stopped by the police and how these natural feelings of terror are what lead police to feel threatened – and for no good reason. Although Nas begins these lines with feelings of despair and hopelessness, he understands that he is fortunate enough to have a massive platform to speak on and calls for

communities to remind the country why people such as Colin Kaepernick (famous NFL quarterback who took a knee during the National Anthem) act in protest towards the current climate and attitude directed at people of their skin color.

“Cops Shot the Kid” Musical Analysis

In addition to the lyrical analysis of this song, it is vital to address how the sound of the music itself enhances the song’s momentous call to action and raises consciousness towards the reality of race relations in the country. While the lyrics on their own serve the purpose of vocalizing struggle within the black community, the song’s sound, vocal structure, and instrumentation provides listeners with an elevated emotional experience that complements the lyrical content. With the help of Andrew Dawson and Noah Goldstein, Kanye West controls the production and musical aspects of the song in order to use the music to supplement the meaning of the lyrics in a manner that maintains and expands on Nas’s artistic vision. As will be demonstrated later, analyzing the song’s production in conjunction with the song’s subject matter is crucial in understanding the emotional reality of South Asians who have been wrongfully disowned by society as a result of the 9/11 attacks.

As previously mentioned, the song begins with a sample of a comedy bit from Richard Pryor that describes the comedian’s experience with the police as a kid. Although this sample can be seen as part of the song’s lyrical structure due to its spoken word nature, it works doubly as part of the song’s sonic purpose, given that it was an artistic decision made by the producers to enhance the meaning of the song. After Pryor’s dialogue of the police yelling, “Ree, put your hands up, black boy!” (0:17) the sound of an overbearing and high-pitched screech follows (0:19). Though the meaning of the screech is not completely clear, it seems to represent one of

two things: a car, whether driven by the police or civilians, swerving or the screaming of civilians in response to the cops' actions and orders. If one is to address this screech as coming from a car, the matter of inherent and seemingly unavoidable actions become prevalent. From the perspective of this car being driven by a police officer, the screech represents the cops' inability to address the situation void of racial bias. Its loud and dissonant sound implies a turning of the wheels that could represent the high speed of the car. It seems that without giving the boys time to put their hands up, the officer has already made up his mind about what to do with them. Rather than take the time to metaphorically stop this car, the officer's racial bias maintains the vehicle's high speed in such a way that represents a failure in doing his job with an objective mindset. There is, here, a continuation of the unchanging view of black people over time.

On the other hand, having the noise come from one of the boys' cars represents an instinctual fight or flight response evoked by the presence of police. The boys understand that they are at an inherent disadvantage with the police due to their skin color, and to them it feels as if the only way out of this dangerous situation is to get away from the police as quickly as possible. Fearful of becoming another victim of police brutality, the boys' only way out is to run. This racially motivated brutality can only be avoided for so long, however, and this is where the interpretation of the screech representing a scream becomes pervasive.

Unlike the ambiguity of the screeching car sound, the scream unquestionably comes from the boys. This response to police presence contains multiple implications of what may have occurred but communally represents the destruction of community by the police. Referring back to the song's title, this scream ultimately reflects the death of a child at the hands of a police officer. The sound of the scream is manipulated through the producers' implementation of reverb, allowing for the screech to echo on into the transition from the sample to the

instrumental. With its loud volume and powerful tone, the echoing scream represents the despair and feelings of helplessness endured by the black community and gives Nas the opportunity to build on this emotion through his own lyrics.

As the screech pans out, the instrumental music of the song begins (0:20). The beat is built around a simple percussion loop that remains unaltered throughout the entirety of the song. What makes this instrumental unique, however, is not the percussion but rather the continuous sample loop of Slick Rick's "The cops shot the kid, the cops shot-." West and his co-producers take advantage of this loop by maintaining its presence throughout the entirety of the song in such a way that makes it burdensome for the listener. Even as Nas raps, the vocal loop never fades, and Slick Rick's own rapping becomes part of the soundscape itself. As such, the listeners are provided with a seemingly never-ending reminder of the power of the police and the force they wrongfully exert on black communities. Moreover, the constant looping of the sample represents both the consistency and frequency of police brutality directed towards black communities, as if each instance of "The cops shot the kid" represents a different occurrence of racially charged abuse of power, and as if each instance is another death. In approaching the loop with this representation, its purpose works twofold. While each instance represents a new death, it concurrently exemplifies society's ability to quickly move on from each death. It works sort of like a stopwatch, with each second adding on another death, waiting for someone to click the stop button and end the brutality. In this case, however, there is no stoppage: the deaths keep on tallying.

With the percussion and Slick Rick sample on constant loop, West and his co-producers add in the screech from the initial Richard Pryor sample at various timestamps (e.g. 0:38, 0:52). Crucial to this reintroduction of the screech is where exactly the producers place it within Nas's

lyrics. Rather than have the screech occur before or after a lyrical bar, the soundbite is heard each time in the middle of Nas's rapping. This placement works in a similar way as the Slick Rick loop, signifying the previously elaborated on implications of the screech as instances that wait for no one, and as instances that are constantly occurring. In having the screech interrupt Nas's lyrics, the producers are able to convey the ongoing racial crisis within black communities by reminding the listeners of Pryor's story. These occurrences of the screech adequately complement the constant Slick Rick loop and maintain the listeners' awareness of what is going on in the real world as the song plays.

The sound of the music reaches a climax following Nas's verse, with the instrumental being the only sound present for twenty seconds until the next verse takes place (1:26). As Nas finishes his verse, the percussion and Slick Rick loop is met with an added synthesizer layer that is reminiscent of a movie soundtrack's urgency during a crucial plot point of a character's development and close proximity to success. In addition to this synthesizer, there is the introduction of another sound layer that develops a concurrent loop of Slick Rick's sample but in a deeper, more distorted tone. In combining Slick Rick's normal tone with one more warped, the sample becomes ominous and unnerving. With no lyrics to pay attention to for these twenty seconds, the listeners are forced to focus on and confront the Slick Rick sample and the screeches head on. The exclusion of lyrics in this section allows for a quick period of reflection of what is going on both in the song and the communities affected by racial transgressions.

This area for reflection comes to an abrupt halt, ending with the same positioning of the echoed screech that had led to the transition into the song's first verse (1:44). As West takes over the second verse of the song for himself, the instrumentation follows the same pattern as in Nas's verse with the percussion, Slick Rick sample, and scattered instances of the screech. Moreover,

the end of West's verse leads back into the inclusion of the synthesizer and distorted sample but this time with the addition of ad-libs by West that direct the listeners to a more focused approach to the song's purpose. West's ad-libs eventually end but the synthesizer and distorted sample remain as the song nears its end (2:30). With a few seconds left, the instrumental cuts out and the normally toned Slick Rick sample plays out rather than loop over again, allowing for the entire sentence to be heard. The full sample plays, with Slick Rick saying, "The cops shot the kid, I still hear him scream." Immediately following this is the screech that has become all too familiar within this song, echoing on as the song closes, leaving the listener with nothing but the reverb of a kid's scream as he is shot by the cops.

With this song, Nas ultimately gives a voice to the other. While he himself has made millions, earned sponsorship deals from companies such as Hennessey, and established himself as a celebrity, Nas still feels responsible for providing commentary and criticism on the mistreatment of underprivileged black Americans. Nas takes advantage of his platform and ability to reach a worldwide audience in order to express the hardships faced by people of his skin color as a result of othering. "Cops Shot the Kid" directly interrogates these hardships and exposes the ongoing strained relationship between Black Americans and the police that has resulted in death, distrust, and racial transgressions that work to tear down communities. In reaching and emotionally impacting such a large audience, Nas effectively provides other hip hop artists with the confidence and motivation to follow in his footsteps and continue this denunciation of othering through their music. Nas is perhaps one of the best-selling artists from New York City, and he has naturally influenced younger artists coming from the same area. His passion for the genre and love for his city gives other rappers the confidence to speak out about their own issues with othering, regardless of their skin color. At the end of the day, hip hop is a

community and a medium through which any artist can create a piece of music that expresses their culture and the society that they live in through their own personal lens.

“Flag Shopping” Introduction

The expression and emotional despair of othering in the genre of hip hop music is not exclusive to black artists singing about their own community in today’s culture. Heems, a rapper of Punjabi descent hailing from New York City, exemplifies this reality. Growing up in the city, Heems has taken influence from rappers such as Nas and has used his own platform to speak up about issues of being a South Asian American in a post-9/11 United States. After graduating from Wesleyan in 2007, Heems began working in the financial sector back in his home city of New York until ultimately leaving the corporate world for the hip hop community (Stagoff-Belfort). Along with his two friends, he started the hip hop group Das Racist, making fun yet socially conscious rap music. After the group disbanded, Heems embarked on a solo career that vocalized the struggles that he and other South Asians in America endured as a result of racism and othering. His debut album, *Eat Pray Thug*, tackled the egregious othering that he and others faced following the terrorist attacks on 9/11. He himself has even said that he considers this album to be a “9/11 & Heartbreak,” a reference to Kanye West’s *808s & Heartbreak* which addressed West’s own personal struggles.

“Flag Shopping” Lyrical Analysis

The fifth track of *Eat Pray Thug*, entitled “Flag Shopping,” depicts Heems’s struggles with trying to fit in with the white majority of the country in order to appease majoritarian racist ideologies against South Asians following 9/11. He begins the song by reciting, “I pledge

allegiance to the flag / Of the United States of America,” a reference to the Pledge of Allegiance (Heems 0:09). In beginning with this, Heems immediately expresses his need to remind Americans that he is just as American as they are regardless of his skin color or ethnic background. Following this, Heems notes that he is “going flag shopping for American flags” (0:29). This is his attempt at appeasing his white neighbors who have othered him, continuing his need to prove that he is just as American as anyone else by buying and displaying American flags. Despite raising an American flag outside of his house, however, Heems reminds the listener that this act is not enough, explaining that the emotional environment of his neighborhood is still working against him. He explains, “They’re staring at our turbans / They’re calling them rags / They’re calling them towels / They’re calling them diapers” (0:32-0:39). In using an anaphora of “They’re calling them,” Heems is able to detail the different names that people have ignorantly given to turbans, listing them off as if it were a shopping list. Despite this ignorance, Heems maintains his confidence and retaliates these lines with “They’re more like crowns” (0:40). The denotation of “crowns” expresses Heems’s inability to succumb to this ignorance, favoring a sense of dignity and pride in his heritage. He refuses to back down to this othering and instead holds his ground. Moreover, Heems raps about his own emotions towards 9/11, saying that “We sad like they sad” but still comments that “now we buy they flags” (0:47). Despite the trauma he and othered people experienced from the attacks, this moment suggests that the emotions of othered people are not seen as important.

He continues to develop these emotions in real time, rapping, “Your mama pray to god / But your dad’ll lose his job / Your dad mad cause he lost all clients / Dad, why you crying? / I thought we had the spirit of the lion” (1:09-1:21). It seems that, despite Heems’ emphasis on “crowns,” this “spirit of the lion” can only go so far; there is an inevitable tipping point that

results in succumbing to one's emotions. By offering a personal scenario, Heems provides an upfront addressing of how families have been negatively affected by othering – the father had nothing to do with 9/11, yet white Americans still decide that he is not worthy of their business. Likewise, the dichotomy of a father crying and “the spirit of the lion” articulates the strength of othering and how it seems inevitable and inescapable. Heems also brings to attention the role that masculinity plays within the realm of othering. The mother prays to God, yet the burden ultimately falls on the father who is responsible for their loss of money. Similarly, the “lion” is an animal considered to be the king of the jungle, so losing its spirit (and falling victim to othering) is representative of being emasculated.

In the following verse, Heems gives a nod to Nas's album *It Was Written*, rapping, “The towers hit the planes / I guess it was written / But now they all lookin’ at us different / They lookin’ at us different / They lookin’ at us different / Yo, why they lookin’ at us different?” (2:03-2:17). This is not just a reference to a Nas album, however, since it is a verse deriving from the Bible (Matthew 4:1-11). Here, however, Heems uses the Bible verse in an Islamic context as an allusion to the warped interpretation of the Quran by Muslim extremists who believe that the holy text has told them to commit acts of terror. The inclusion of “I guess” depicts how, although Heems knows it is not true, people will still claim the Quran to be the messenger of the attacks. The repetition of “They lookin’ at us different” emphasizes the extent to which this othering has occurred in the minds of the majority.

Heems ends the song on a personal note, explaining that he was there to witness the towers falling. He raps, “And I was there / I saw the towers and the planes / And I’ll never be the same” (2:33). The inclusion of this anecdote intensifies the emotions built into his lyrics and the effect that the attacks had on him personally. Just a high schooler when it happened, Heems

endured trauma that a teenager should never experience, and yet there is no one to console him or explain to him that it was not his fault. Further detailing this trauma, he says, “I seen things that I never wanna see again / I heard things that I never wanna hear again” (2:40). Yet, despite all of this, Heems closes the track just how his first verse began, noting that “And now we’re going flag shopping” (2:48). It feels as if the cries for help have failed; no matter how he or his South Asians have been grossly impacted by the attacks and the ignorance of his white neighbors, he is still forced to buy an American flag and raise it in an effort to appease the majority that continues to work against him. Consequently, the need to appease the majority develops othering into something inescapable by nature, similar to how Nas’s “Cops Shot the Kid” expresses the poor relationship between black Americans and police officers as inevitable. As much as Heems or Nas wish to rid themselves and their communities of othering, the ever-present discrimination that fuels this othering blocks their attempts from being successful and reinstates an inescapable reality.

“Flag Shopping” Musical Analysis

With sole control over the sonic elements of this song, producer Bill Ding develops a soundtrack to “Flag Shopping” that is able to amplify the emotion and despair Heems is confronted with as a consequence of being of South Asian heritage in New York City. In contrast to the overbearing and in-your-face sentiment embedded in the instrumental aspect of “Cops Shot the Kid,” Ding’s production embodies a tonal grit representative of New York’s hip hop scene that intertwines bravery with a waning trepidation that South Asians in the United States experience on a daily basis. This dichotomy of emotions projected through the song’s instrumental track is crucial to its overall message and ultimately serves to help the listener understand the perspective of the

“other” when faced with unwarranted acts of racism and alienation. When combined with Heems’s lyrical content and vocal timbre, the production of this song results in a piece of work whose purpose goes beyond the limitations of the song’s time and space and into the harsh reality of the social climate of the U.S. that places South Asians outside of what is considered normal.

The song begins with a piano loop in a high range, paying homage to a style of hip hop that is distinctively derivative of New York City. The loop is reminiscent of something that appears in a Wu-Tang Clan or Griselda song, and it is imperative to explore this simple yet purposeful comparison. Both of these hip hop groups hail from New York, with their lyrical content providing similar messages of committing crime, trafficking drugs, and fiercely opposing police order. In considering these messages with “Flag Shopping,” the piano loop’s relationship and resonance with gritty New York hip hop immediately emits feelings of guilt and a lack of innocence for one’s actions. Mixing this idea with the lyrical content of the song, however, it becomes clear that Heems is not guilty of anything; society has programmed him to feel otherwise. This form of gaslighting, which falsely maligns South Asians as “guilty” or “complicit” becomes obvious as Heems begins to recite the Pledge of Allegiance over the piano loop, demonstrating how the majority culture has foisted upon the South Asian community a kind of guilt in which they have no complicity. The high-pitched piano loop effectively drives a juxtaposition of crime and unwarranted punishment that personalizes the emotion of the lyrical content while at the same time allowing for Heems’s overall message and issues with societal “othering” to be both understood and acted upon.

While the piano loop is not as sonically intrusive as the Slick Rick sample in “Cops Shot the Kid,” it exerts a similar menacing presence that does not wane at any point in the song. It is

relentless, stops for nothing, and leaves no room for rest. Within the context of “Flag Shopping,” this persistent piano loop is indicative of Heems and his South Asian community’s inescapable fear of the societal and cultural majority that dictates right from wrong. Just as the loop continues on without falter, South Asians who have been “othered” experience a fear of constant surveillance by their white neighbors that shows no sign of dwindling. Furthering this idea of indefatigable surveillance is the menacing qualities of the piano’s shrill pitch. While it bears resemblance to the groundwork of the New York hip hop scene, it concurrently reminds the listener of the experience of watching a horror movie whose scenes are driven by haunting, atmospheric instrumentation rather than dialogue; it is terrifying and void of reassurance.

As Heems continues to recite the Pledge of Allegiance, an added 808 layer begins to supplement the piano loop (0:14). In direct contrast to the high-pitched riff, the introduction of these 808s provides the instrumental with a deep, haunting undertone whose soundscape lacks any certain pitch definition. The lower-pitched tendencies of the 808s add on to the horror movie ambiance set forth by the piano loop and maintains the instrumental’s fearful tone. The layer works similarly to a bass guitar, providing complementary assistance to the song’s purpose while not being the primary focus. Nonetheless, the 808s are prevalent and work together with the piano loop to encapsulate the fear of wrongful guilt and unwarranted surveillance brought out by racial discrimination and the process of “othering.” Moreover, the layer’s subtle and underlying tendencies reflect the sometimes hard to see but still omnipresent feelings of being watched and alienated by society. The omniscient essence developed by the 808s supplements Heems’s need to appease his white neighbors who he feels to be watching his every move. Similarly, the presence of the 808s throughout the entire song prove Heems’s attempts to appease his neighbors

to be less than satisfactory, seeing as his purchase of an American flag still warrants suspicion and the continuation of his “othering.”

Complementing these 808s is the high-pitched squeal of an electric guitar that floats in and out of the song at various points in time (e.g. 0:30). Although the guitar’s chords are overpowered in volume by other sounds of the production, what matters is that they are present and were a conscious decision to include. It appears mostly during instances of Heems’s reiteration of having to go shopping for American flags, squealing in the background as if they were representative of police sirens threatening and surveilling him as a consequence of his South Asian heritage. This idea of the guitar representing the police adds on to the power of the piano loop and 808s’ purpose of conveying blameworthiness and an omniscient power built to destroy his South Asian culture in favor of one that coincides with the majority’s societal norms.

In addition to the instrumentation and production quality of the song, Heems’s vocals provide a powerful glimpse into how the process of “othering” has affected him. As he raps, his voice is undoubtedly strained with emotion in what could be classified as a vocal fry. It is raspy and dry, similar to how one’s voice may sound after screaming for a prolonged period of time. His voice has lost its character and become a cry for help, as if he is forcing the words out of his mouth rather than speaking with clarity and ease. Likewise, this vocal fry showcases Heems’s exhaustive battle with having to please his neighbors under the surveillance brought out by an ignorant conclusion of guilt directed his way. His verses feel as though they were working at a slower tempo than the instrumental itself, dragging the time on while overenunciating words. This decrease in tempo combined with his strained vocals give off the characterization of a zombie-like figure who is moving at a slower pace than what is expected of him. As such, Heems’s vocal structure finds himself as a zombie-slave to conformity that works against

everything he stands for. It is out of his control, however. His strain and slow pace continue throughout the entirety of the song and shows no signs of changing direction, representing his inability to satisfy the racist needs of the societal majority that surrounds him on a daily basis.

“Patriot Act” Lyrical Analysis

On the closing track of *Eat Pray Thug*, Heems writes “Patriot Act,” a song that continues the personal anecdote of the attacks found in “Flag Shopping.” As the song proceeds to the outro, the instrumentals quiet and the mood changes to reflect his pain. He recalls:

Then the towers fell in front of my eyes / And I remember the principal said they wouldn’t / And for a month they used my high school as a triage / And so we went to school in Brooklyn / And the city’s board of ed hired shrinks for the students / And maybe I should have seen one. (Heems 1:23-1:42).

He does not clarify why he did not take advantage of the shrinks, but it is possible that Heems was scared or felt ostracized as a result of the attack. To him, keeping to himself felt like the smartest thing to do in order to avoid further othering and racism. This avoidance, however, can only last for so long as he describes, “And from then on they called us all Osama / This old Sikh man on the bus was Osama / I was Osama, we were Osama / Are you Osama?” (1:43-1:53). The othering of South Asians had resulted in an ignorant generalization that wrongfully segregates them into the category of terrorists. Likewise, Heems includes the denotation of a Sikh as Osama – a classification that emphasizes the consideration of all South Asians as Muslim.

Heems refers back to “Flag Shopping” in the following lines, rapping, “And so we rushed to buy flags for our doors / Bright American flags that read ‘I am not Osama’” (1:55-2:02). This idea of buying flags to represent their American flag is furthered when he relates himself to

white men, saying “And we ironed our polo shirts and we combed our hair / And we proudly paid our taxes / And we immediately donated to a local white politician / And we yelled ‘I’m just like you’ as quietly and calmly as we could” (2:03-2:17). With this, Heems describes his need to fully assimilate into white, majoritarian culture in order to be accepted by his peers. He creates the oxymoron of yelling “quietly and calmly,” which ultimately exemplifies his need to assimilate in a way that does not draw too much attention to himself because any amount of attention will result in a fall back to the othering he is trying to escape. As expected, this attention cannot be escaped as Heems raps, “Like when my name is too long to pronounce at work and raised too much attention” (2:23). Heems and his peers can do all they want to escape the other categorization, but their attempts are hopeless. One cannot escape their heritage; it is part of their identity. This leaves open the question: what are the “others” supposed to do in order to please the majority?

Heems continues this theme of assimilation when talking about a man from his neighborhood who was deported back to Asia. He recalls:

And yesterday, more than then years later, another man from the neighborhood was
deported / I went to expensive white people school with his daughter / For four years we
read books and together we yelled ‘I’m just like you’ / But she won’t get to correct her
father’s English at dinner anymore. (2:54-3:10)

These lines bring up two perspectives on othering: the assimilation with his classmate at a “white people school” and his classmate’s urge to fix her father’s broken English in order to prevent him from experiencing any further racism. He and his classmate still felt inclined to prove that they were just like their peers even though they were part of the school’s community that consisted of other students who were no smarter than them. He adds another anecdote, rapping, “And the FBI

harassed one of my dad's friends so much he packed up his stuff and took his family and they moved back to Pakistan / They would come at night and they would wake them up and make a mess, and the mess upset his wife" (3:11-3:23). The inclusion of this "mess" made by the FBI is put in place in order to humanize the family and emphasize their values of a home that is clean and void of trouble. Further, this "mess" is included to assert that the FBI is creating the problem themselves – the house was clean until they came in and wrongfully harassed the family.

After describing the problems other families have endured, Heems relates this disruption back to his own family. He raps:

Those giant metal birds in the sky brought my parents near and made things confusing /
And then crashed into those buildings and made things confusing / But I guess it's okay
because my dad wasn't deported / And I still get to correct his English at dinner / So he
doesn't raise too much attention and get labeled a troublemaker. (3:27-3:47)

He brings back the inclusion of "I guess" found in "Flag Shopping" that exemplifies his lack of belief in the proceeding comment. He attempts to find a silver lining in it all, that his father was not deported, but this does not take away from the fact that the other families were either taken away or harassed to the point where they had to leave the country. Just as he mentioned with his classmate, Heems still has the opportunity to correct his father's English at dinner, but only at the cost of others. It is interesting to note how Heems focuses on the deportation of his father and not his mother. He makes it seem as if his mother is not at an immediate risk of the effects of othering which returns back to the relationship that masculinity has with being othered. This is not to say that women are not othered, but rather that males find the process of othering to be directly related to their masculinity. Regardless, Heems describes an ongoing fight against racism and othering, and it does not appear to be a fight that can be won.

Patriot Act Instrumental Analysis

In contrast to the New York inspired instrumental of “Flag Shopping,” producer Boody B takes over the musical aspects of “Patriot Act” in a way that allows for the album to close on a track whose aura is reminiscent of Heems’s South Asian roots. The song’s instrumentation and vocal expression moves away from the grittiness embedded in “Flag Shopping” and manifests an exhaustion representative of defeat and a loss of hope. Whereas “Flag Shopping” showcased Heems’s attempts at appeasing his neighbors in an effort to overcome the racist process of othering, the musical aspects of “Patriot Act” in combination with the lyrical content portrays Heems’s attitude towards his attempts to be lackluster and pointless. In having this song close out the album, Heems and Boody B create a piece of work that bears similarities to how Shakespeare ends *Hamlet*. As the titular character nears death, he makes one last wish to his friend Horatio in hopes of keeping his story alive beyond his own passing, saying, “If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart, / Absent thee from felicity awhile, / And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain, / To tell my story” (Shakespeare 329-332). Likewise, the South Asian inspired instrumental mixed with Heems’s exhaustion works similarly in that Heems ends the album with a reminder of the heritage he is proud of while concurrently displaying his fear of a lack of rightful solution for the othering that his neighbors and the country as a whole have imposed on him and his culture. As such, the instrumentation of this song has expressed his own defeat, leaving the drive for solution up to the listeners to finish.

The instrumental starts with a short, distorted sample of what sounds to be a violin. This string instrument is not played in a classical music sort of way, but rather one inspired by a more South Asian style that is more upbeat and embedded with South Asian culture. More layers are introduced for the sake of tempo and structure, with the snare driving its focus. The snare is both

distorted and affected by a strong reverb, making its loud crashing tendencies echo on as if it were being hit in an empty church (0:20). It is precluded and preceded by a high-pitched rattling that works to both lead up to and follow the snare in a way that elevates the dichotomy of the two sounds. The rattling is not as loud as the snare's hit but provides the listener with a growing sense that something bad is about to happen or has already been set forth. While the snare is representative of something happening, the rattling is more so representative of the actions that take place before and after. Moreover, the rattling's positioning in relation to the snare expresses the persistence of the percussion; the snare's rattle and echoes are ongoing instead of reaching a clear halt. As such, Heems's exhaustion with othering becomes prevalent in that, no matter what actions he or his culture takes, societal alienation waits for nothing.

A lower-range electric piano chord is added into the instrumental towards the beginning of Heems's verse, thumping methodically to the beat's tempo. Its loop begins towards the deeper side of the piano's keys, gradually working its way up to a higher-range chord that works to emphasize a growing sense of urgency and nearing of climax (0:25). Since this is a loop, the climax is never actually reached and instead returns back to the lower keys in an attempt to express the possibility of defeating the process of othering while only ending up succumbing to its powerful implications. Likewise, this growing sense directed towards a sense of urgency and climax are able to provide Heems's lyrics with a purpose that could not have been reached with just words alone. Rather than exclude these chords and maintain favor of a steadier instrumental, their inclusion demonstrates a call for action and cognizance in regard to the societal issues expressed lyrically. It directs the listeners' attention to the paramount nature of the lyrics while simultaneously raising anxious feelings of the reality of what is occurring and what is to come.

The urgent persona of these chords also dictates an exponentially rising fear of time running out, as if action must be taken immediately in order to eradicate the space that occupies the other.

As the song's lyrical content moves from a macro to micro level that investigates Heems's personal experience with seeing the towers fall from his own high school, Boody B introduces a flute into the instrumental that maintains the music's South Asian atmosphere (1:23). The flute replaces the urgency of the electric piano chords that were previously being looped and essentially switches the mood of the song into one that has become more personal. Its tone is reminiscent of what type of music would be played in the background of a Middle Eastern bazaar, bringing the listener into a fully immersive experience of what it means to be South Asian. Rather than incorporate the stylistic tendencies of New York hip hop, Boody B's production develops a telling dichotomy between the story of Heems watching the towers fall in New York City and his own Asian heritage; while Heems is in New York, the flute serves as a reminder of who he is and where his ancestors came from. On the other hand, this reminder concurrently expresses the inability to avoid the process of othering, seeing as Heems cannot possibly rid himself of his own ethnic background. As a result, Heems and other South Asian Americans are forced to find a way to appease the societal majority while still carrying and proudly representing their cultural background.

Heems goes on to describe how exactly he and his peers have been affected by the social aftermath of the attacks, listing off different instances of ignorance driven racism. As he raps about these situations, the percussion begins to pick up tempo (2:23). Rather than have this speed represent a sense of urgency and fear like the earlier piano chords, this uptick in momentum works to build up a necessary cognizance of the consequences developed by othering. The momentum also works against this cognizance, since the instrumental is moving too fast for each

instance of racism to be analyzed and reflected upon, continuing the notion of othering being an ongoing process that exhibits no signs of stopping or slowing down. In addition to this, the upbeat atmosphere developed by the increase in tempo stands in juxtaposition to the actual lyrics of the song. While the instrumental at this point expresses hope and the warmth of one's heritage, it stands in direct conflict with what Heems is rapping about; there is nothing upbeat or hopeful about Heems's recollection of a cab driver who had been beaten to death for his race. This juxtaposition is put into place in order to express the fact that, while the country may seem to be doing well on a macro level, it does not mean that everything is good on a more personal, micro level. Those who find themselves in the category of the other are surrounded by the glee of the societal majority, while having to concurrently fight for their own lives, freedom, and respect.

The vocal technicalities of the song work similarly to how the incorporation of voice fused with instrumental affected the overall purpose of "Flag Shopping." In both cases, Heems continues to exhibit a vocal fry that has been impacted by the stress and lack of hope brought about by the process of othering. The vocal effects, or lack thereof, in "Patriot Act," still maintain a unique perspective of purpose that allows for the song's content to be elevated beyond just its lyrics. Returning to the beginning of the song, Heems's repetition of "Babylon policing the people" is distorted and likened to the vocal effects of a speakerphone, keeping in tune the comparison of a Middle Eastern bazaar (0:07). It portrays Heems as someone attempting to publicly expose the racist ills of society, similar to how street preachers loudly express and impose their beliefs on the public all the while no one is actually listening. This speakerphone effect soon turns into a lower-pitched distortion more comparable to the sound of a demon (0:14). With this, Heems's repetition of the quote falls short in purpose and instead reflects the

“demons” or racist majority’s stance on the matter, as if they are agreeing with him on how the people are being policed while challenging him to do something about it. More clearly, the distorted voice represents society’s cognizance of their wrongdoings and their lack of care to take action or to reconsider their perspective. For as much Heems can do to destroy racism and the process of othering, he is burdened under the control and discretion of the majority’s ignorant understanding of what it means to be South Asian.

After the mood of the instrumental is directed towards a more personal expression of othering with the inclusion of the flute, Heems’s rapping becomes more of a spoken word experience that develops a conversationalist rather than confrontational attitude. While he is technically still rapping, it is less rhythmic and more monotone, giving the feeling of a conversation. In considering this conversation, it is not clear who or which group of people constitutes the audience. For example, it is unclear whether he may be talking to people of his culture, to people against his culture, or to himself. Regardless, the conversationalist tone of voice allows for the listener to follow his train of thought out loud and understand the jumbled listings of racist acts he has talked about. It allows for Heems to create a more personal space of reflection that invites people to listen and take in what he is actually saying, in hopes that they might take what they have learned and act upon it on their own. It also places Heems in a more vulnerable position, which in turn lets him more fully develop his thoughts and purpose in a form that affects not just him, but those willing to listen. This vulnerability expressed is representative of the fact that Heems has already dealt with the beratement and othering driven by his neighbors, and that nothing more can hurt him. In maintaining this conversationalist, spoken word verse that is void of any technical editing, Heems ultimately provides the listeners of a raw and unabated perspective of who he is and what he has to go through on a daily basis, providing

them with the groundwork for what needs to be fixed within their culture in order to protect the equally deserved rights of the other.

Hip Hop Conclusion

In Rose's *Black Noise*, she references author Mike Davis, who "attended an Inglewood Crip and Blood gang truce meeting" following the Los Angeles riots, where they "voiced impassioned testimonials and called for unity and political action" (Rose 19). Davis described the gang members' speeches as spoken in "a rap rhythm and with rap eloquence" (Rose 19). It is clear that hip hop is at the very groundwork for the need for unity and action within both the community and country, and the importance of the genre should not be dismissed. Whether it is dealing with racial inequality between blacks and whites, or the othering of South Asian Americans in a post 9/11 context, hip hop is used as a platform for these cries for help to be heard. Rose ends her first chapter with a quote from Davis, who concludes, "Hip hop is the fundamental matrix of self-expression for this whole generation" (Rose 20). The genre has provided artists like Heems, who is not a part of the black community rooted in hip hop, with the creative platform to voice his and his communities struggles with living in a post 9/11 America in an effort to call for change, as long as people are willing to listen.

Chapter 2

South Asian Literature, Muslim Identity, and Othering in Post-9/11 America

The Reluctant Fundamentalist Introduction

In 2007, Pakistani author Mohsin Hamid released *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, a fictional novel that details the trials and tribulations of being a Pakistani man living in New York City. Changez, whose full name is never disclosed, is a recent graduate of Princeton who finds himself at odds with his Pakistani heritage and his white-collar career. The novel is narrated in both the past and present, with the present narration leading the direction of the story. Changez sits at dinner with a stranger in Pakistan, providing the stranger with an account of his life in New York that is often interrupted by their conversation in real time. He begins the story by introducing the job he held directly after graduating Princeton at Underwood Samson, a prestigious and highly sought out job for recent Ivy League graduates. Changez delves into the specifics of his time in New York City, with topics ranging from the girl he is in love with to his work on valuing various companies for the firm. As a Pakistani living in America, Changez experiences an assimilation into American culture which blurs his conceptualization of identity and life purpose during the time surrounding the attacks on 9/11.

While this novel is just a singular account of life as a Pakistani in America, the issues that present themselves throughout the story are not specific to just Changez. Hamid's writing exposes issues both external and internal, criticizing America's distrust of and inability to entirely reconcile with the foreign while magnifying the foreigner's struggle to fit in with locals and stay true to their home culture. On a macroscopic level, this text follows the plight of the other, providing readers with an honest and vulnerable look into what it is truly like to be part of a society that does not fully accept you for who you are. The text encounters a sort of forced

assimilation into American culture, leaving Changez lost in a world that aims to work against him. Throughout the novel, Changez is met with suspicion and a lack of trust by his peers who have no real basis for their discrimination, such as getting “looks of concern” when entering an airplane (Hamid 74).. As a result of his skin color and beard, Changez is at odds with those who surround him in America and must consistently remind his peers that he is far from the man they profile him as. Changez is a Princeton graduate who fits right into the culture of New York City, yet society’s ignorance and lack of trust surrounds him and forces him to believe that he does not belong.

Uncertainty and Distrust

A lack of trust and uncertainty about who Changez is can be seen explicitly during the scenes in which he is eating dinner with an American stranger in Pakistan. In the second sentence of the novel, Changez addresses the stranger, saying “Ah, I see I have alarmed you. Do not be frightened by my beard; I am a lover of America” (Hamid 1). Given that this is the second sentence of the novel, the reader does not know much about Changez aside from the fact that he has a beard and loves America. At this point, Changez’s whereabouts and his nationality are unknown, however the inclusion of his beard and the need to assert his love for America alludes to the possibility that the stranger finds him dangerous or untrustful. On its own, a beard is a perfectly normal thing for a man to have, so Changez’s comments about not being frightened allude to his beard being foreign and different from those that the stranger has seen in his own country. This foreignness of the beard then makes sense when thinking as to why Changez feels the need to include his love for America. Without knowing anything about Changez, the stranger quietly profiles him anyway and ignorantly places him in a sort of categorical limbo that exerts a

foreboding sense of suspicion rather than trust. Changez is immediately othered by the stranger's alarmed body language and is forced to make an attempt to appease him even if it may have no real effect on the stranger's opinion.

Changez has never actually revealed who he is talking to; he simply addresses the person as "you," which raises the possibility of the stranger doubling as the reader. If the stranger represents the reader, Changez's approach to the conversation comes across as both strategic and manipulative. The reader does not know anything about Changez at this point, so it may be that Changez's reassurance manipulates the reader's characterization of him since they have no reason to assume he is a threat. There is no way to be sure that Changez is telling the truth about who he is, yet his position as the narrator makes the reader trust him regardless. The stranger's position as the reader also develops Changez's storytelling into a sort of soliloquy to be understood as canon. Likewise, the relationship between the stranger and reader affects the novel's discourse in a way that allows the reader to immerse themselves into the story. This immersion might not be possible or as productive if done through a medium that is not a novel.

This lack of trust is continued when their tea arrives at the table. As they are given their tea, Changez maintains his innocence, saying:

Ah, our tea has arrived! Do not look so suspicious. I assure you, sir, nothing untoward will happen to you, not even a runny stomach. After all, it is not as if it has been *poisoned*. Come, if it makes you more comfortable, let me switch my cup with yours (11).

Changez explicitly calls out the stranger's hesitation in drinking the tea and continues to remind him that he means no harm. The stranger still does not know much about Changez's character, which furthers the extent to which he is profiled on the basis of his appearance. Changez feels

responsible for making the stranger feel comfortable and offers to switch teacups with him. In a way, Changez enables this othering with the intent to appease instead of adequately correcting and eliminating the stranger's ignorant bias directed towards him. His emphasis on the word "poisoned" exposes the degree of his othering. He assumes that the man finds him dangerous and untrustworthy, ultimately using "poisoned" to expose the farfetched and poorly thought-out suspicion that the stranger upholds against him. Despite this, Changez remains calm as if he has encountered this situation before and attempts to control the tense atmosphere before it gets out of hand.

The stranger, according to Changez's narration, finds himself fully committed to the othering and profiling of Changez, whether intentional or not. Considering that the dinner takes place in Pakistan, the stranger himself is the one who is foreign, yet Changez is the one who feels responsible for proving his own innocence. Changez does not discriminate against the stranger and instead welcomes him into his culture, making the stranger's suspicions seem unwarranted and out of place. As expected, however, the othering continues. Changez seems actively bothered by the stranger's body language and has to once more speak up for the stranger who has been silenced by the narration, noting:

I hope you will not mind my saying so, but the frequency and purposefulness with which you glance about – a steady tick-tick-tick seeming to beat in your head as you move your gaze from one point to the next – brings to mind the behavior of an animal that has ventured too far from its lair and is now, in unfamiliar surroundings, uncertain whether it is predator or prey! (31)

Changez approaches the situation with caution, aware of how quickly it can transform into a negative and harmful experience. In beginning his comment with "I hope you will not mind my

saying so,” Changez proves his complete awareness of the stranger’s relentless othering and understands that one false move will only elevate the tension further. The inclusion of this “steady tick-tick-tick” that seems to sound in the stranger’s head exerts a sort of fight or flight energy, as if the stranger is ready to run away or take action against Changez at any moment. There is a lack of trust in Changez that is heightened by his comparison of the stranger to an “animal that has ventured too far from its lair” and is “uncertain whether it is predator or prey.” Interestingly, the stranger fails to take into account how Changez must have felt when in America as a foreigner. While not explicitly said, Changez’s narration asserts that the stranger believes himself and his American background to be superior to Changez and he finds Changez to be a subordinate to him regardless of his accomplishments and genuine character. Likewise, this inability to consider the situation from the perspective of Changez only reifies the othering that has taken place. It represents a harmful ignorance and bias that does not appear to falter at any point, and that does not allude to any faltering in the future. Changez can say as much as he can to make the stranger feel comfortable and safe, but his attempts are left futile.

Later in the story, the lights surrounding their dinner table turn off and leave the stranger even more on edge than before. At this point, their dinner has become a looping cycle of uncertainty and bias that drives the tension between them and establishes a strict inability of the stranger to eliminate his othering of Changez. As the lights go out, Changez reassures the stranger:

Do not be alarmed, sir; as I mentioned before, fluctuations and blackouts are common in Pakistan. Really, you are overreacting; it is not yet so dark. The sky above us still contains a tinge of color, and I can see you quite clearly as you stand there with your hand in your jacket. I assure you: no one will attempt to steal your wallet (60)

The “steady tick-tick-tick” in the stranger’s head refuses to let up and refuses to believe that he is in any way safe from the other. He is scared of the other, unable to accept the foreigner as someone just like him. To the stranger, the other is combative and malicious. Even after listening to Changez speak about his humanizing experiences in New York City, it is as if the stranger is not retaining anything and as if he is more focused on protecting himself from an imagined danger. Changez notes that the two of them can still see each other “quite clearly,” which presents the question of what the issue is if they can both still see, as well as the question of what it means to “see” someone else. Instead of claiming that the blackout is what causes this feeling of alarm, the stranger uses the blackout to justify his obvious othering and distrust of Changez. He hides behind the façade of contextual and visible events, such as the blackout or tea, when the issue he has is really with Changez being a Pakistani man. He uses these events to justify his uncertainty and distrust in Changez, further developing his othering of Changez and ultimately setting in place the fact that his ignorant suspicions and racial bias are concrete and non-influenceable.

The inability to change the stranger’s mind raises the question of whether or not it is even worth it for Changez to keep reminding him of their safety; if the attempts to appease the stranger have all failed, what is the point in continuing to try? This question places Changez at a standstill, uncertain whether it is better to stay quiet or to keep reassuring him. It seems that whatever Changez chooses, to reassure or to remain silent, the stranger’s predisposed bias is unwavering. As the other, Changez becomes debilitated and unable to reconcile with the stranger. There is nothing that he can do to appease the stranger’s lack of trust, further cementing his position as the other. The majority refuses to listen, to hear the stories and values of the other, and to make attempts to reconcile.

The conversation comes close to an end as the stranger's distrust in Changez reaches a peak. As Changez talks about his own paranoia of constantly being observed, he redirects his attention to the stranger's body language. After Changez talks about having to "conduct [himself] without panic," he notes that "Most of all, I must avoid what you are doing in this instant, namely constantly looking over my shoulder" (183). A group of men begin to close in on Changez and the stranger, and the waiter offers Changez a "nod of recognition" that "is rather grim" (183). To appease the stranger's growing sense of panic, Changez says:

But they mean you no harm, I assure you. It seems an obvious thing to say, but you should not imagine that we Pakistanis are all terrorists, just as we should not imagine that you Americans are all undercover assassins. (183)

In saying this, Changez alludes to his own reservations about the stranger by implying the possibility of him being an undercover assassin. As the two of them leave the table to go back to the stranger's hotel, the waiter "rapidly" closes in on them and waves at Changez to detain the stranger. Changez attempts to shake the stranger's hand before departing but notices his hand reaching into his jacket to reveal "a glint of metal." (184). What exactly the stranger is reaching for is unknown, though it is possible that it is a gun. In the final lines of the novel, Changez says, "Given that you and I are now bound by a certain shared intimacy, I trust it is from the holder of your business cards" (184). It is impossible to know whether this metal is a business card holder, which dilutes their understanding of trust; Changez can hope that it is not a gun, but he cannot place his trust into something out of his control just as the stranger cannot trust that Changez is not a terrorist.

Self-Identity

In concurrence with the stranger's uncertainty and lack of trust, Changez himself takes issue with his own self-identity throughout the novel. Whereas Changez exhibits confidence in his identity during his dinner with the stranger, the story Changez tells depicts him as a foreigner whose ties to his homeland have been strained by cultural assimilation. To track the progression of Changez's fleeting identity, it is important to begin with his experience at Princeton University. When discussing the admissions process, Changez makes clear that he was in the minority while applying as an international student but nevertheless notes that he was unaffected in doing so. He elaborates on being an international student, saying:

Students like me were given visas and scholarships, complete financial aid, mind you, and invited into the ranks of the meritocracy. In return, we were expected to contribute our talents to your society, the society we were joining. And for the most part, we were happy to do so (4)

While the first sentence makes his Princeton experience out to be one that someone would capitalize on for good use, the second sentence alludes to issues of self-identity. In emphasizing that it was "your society," Changez displays a cognizance in his lack of belonging, almost as if he was intruding on the society of the stranger. Changez also feels inclined to clarify which society he was talking about, which is odd considering that "your society," being American society, is implied within the conversation's context. By reiterating that it was this society that they "were joining," Changez displays a consistent need to remind the stranger that he himself rightfully belonged in their society. Furthermore, Changez's inclusion of "And for the most part" hints at the notion that not everything about joining America and the Princeton network was perfect.

Changez expands on these reservations later when continuing to talk about Princeton. He says to the stranger:

Princeton made everything possible for me. But it did not, *could* not, make me forget such things as how much I enjoy the tea in this, the city of my birth, steeped long enough to acquire a rich, dark color, and made creamy with fresh, full-fat milk. (15)

Here, Changez begins to realize his struggles with self-identity. While he displays a sense of gratefulness for the opportunities Princeton gave him, there is still a lingering longing for home that could not possibly be satisfied in New York City. The emphasis of “did not, *could not*” proves this point and places Changez in a position where he is stuck between two cultures that have no comfortable balance of feeling at home. Moreover, Changez’s detailed description of the tea represents this longing for Pakistan; he knows the “rich, dark color” of the tea “made creamy with fresh, full-fat milk” like the back of his hand, yet this is not something that he could attain in New York. It is possible that he could find a similar tasting tea somewhere in the city, but it would not bear the same atmospheric reminiscence of his home country. Inevitably, these minute details of home, such as the taste of tea, deepen his struggle of not feeling totally assimilated in the American culture. There will always be something holding him back.

When discussing his experience in New York City, Changez describes an initial sense of belonging that soon wavers as a result of attempted assimilation into American culture. With a Princeton degree and a position at the prestigious Samson Underwood consulting firm, Changez has been given the opportunity to make a name for himself in a country still foreign to him. He begins by discussing his identity as a New Yorker, saying:

In a subway car, my skin would typically fall in the middle of the color spectrum. On street corners, tourists would ask me for directions. I was, in four and a half years, never an American; I was *immediately* a New Yorker. (33)

At first glance, New York City is a melting pot of culture that does not have one leading ethnicity; people come from all over the world to get the opportunity to live here. Changez's remarks on how he felt as a foreigner confirm this, considering he found an immediate sense of belonging in the city itself. The issue, however, is his declaration that he was "in four and a half years, never an American." There is a clear distinction being made between New York City and America that pushes the idea of Changez not belonging in the bigger picture. He might find himself accepted in New York City, but the same could not be said for the country as a whole. While he has not explicitly dealt with struggles of self-identity or cultural assimilation at this point, Changez's commentary on Princeton and his initial experiences in New York City sets the groundwork for what is to come.

As part of Changez's job at Samson Underwood, he is sent to Manila with the task of valuing a company whose transfer of ownership is imminent. Here, Changez interacts and works with Filipinos in a fashion that allows him to hide behind the façade of being American. He elaborates on these interactions, recalling:

I attempted to act and speak, as much as my dignity would permit, more like an *American*. The Filipinos we worked with seemed to look up to my American colleagues, accepting them almost instinctively as members of the officer class of global business – and I wanted my share of that respect as well. (65)

In stating that he "attempted" to come across as American, Changez shows awareness of this being a conscious thing; he was deliberately trying to fit in rather than doing so organically. This

is one of the first instances in which Changez actively removes himself from his Pakistani heritage. When surrounded by his American coworkers, he feels inclined to act the same way as them rather than to act himself. Hesitantly, he notes that he acted “as much as [his] dignity would permit” but this hesitation does not seem relevant due to the fact that he made the attempt regardless. Moreover, whatever dignity he has left is nullified by his comments on *why* he decided to act American. The Filipinos considered themselves to be under Americans on the social ladder and, as a consequence, trusted the intuition of Changez’s coworkers. If Changez were to have a sense of dignity and a clear understanding of his identity, it’s more purposeful to gain the trust and admiration of the Filipinos based on his character rather than his American rhetoric. There is no reason why Changez could not get his “share of that respect” as a Pakistani. He works at the same company as his American counterparts and has proved himself to be an instrumental part of the team, so it is hard to understand why he felt so inclined to act as a sort of imposter. The conclusion that makes the most sense is that this act was Changez’s attempt to remove himself from the other but in doing so, he removes himself from who he truly is.

Changez continues to speak on his forced American mannerisms, remarking that this persona was something he actively learned. While doing so, he makes clear his moral hesitations. He says to the stranger:

I learned to cut in front of lines with an extraterritorial smile; and I learned to answer, when asked where I was from, that I was from New York. Did these things trouble me, you ask? Certainly, sir; I was often ashamed. But outwardly I gave no sign of this. (65)

In denoting that cutting lines and saying he was from New York were mannerisms that he had “learned,” Changez inadvertently reveals that he had essentially been studying the way Americans act. He had already previously mentioned that he was “*immediately* a New Yorker,”

yet he still felt inclined to learn how to act like his American counterparts. Changez describes his actions as if he were proud to do so, emphasizing himself cutting lines with “an extraterritorial smile.” In including that this smile was “extraterritorial,” Changez asserts a racial hierarchy that places his American persona above the Filipinos he interacts with. Despite this, he claims that he “was often ashamed.” If this shame is felt “often” instead of all the time, then one can confidently conclude that there were instances in which Changez acted against his culture gleefully and without restraint. He does mention, however, that he “outwardly...gave no sign of this” shame, which subtly implies an internal struggle. While he does not come across as shameful or resentful at his change of character, he is cognizant of the façade he has created which ultimately expresses a sense of wrongful assimilation. It is as though he does not wish to do away with his Pakistani roots yet is forced to actively suppress his heritage in order to reap the benefits of being American.

As time goes on in Manila, Changez begins to question his American antics and develops a moral grounding that divides his identity as a Pakistani and an American. His time spent in Manila had effectively blurred his sense of being and dissociated himself from the man he was attempting to be. When working with his company, Changez notes:

Then one of my colleagues asked me a question, and when I turned to answer him, something rather strange took place. I looked at him – at his fair hair and light eyes and, most of all, his oblivious immersion in the minutiae of our work – and thought, you are so *foreign*. I felt in that moment much closer to the Filipino driver than to him; I felt I was play-acting when in reality I ought to be making my way home, like the people on the street outside (67)

After spending his time pretending to be American, Changez finally returns back to reality and begins to consider his surrounding environment through the eyes of his own true self. All this time, Changez had considered himself to be the foreign and now, hundreds of miles away from New York City, it is the American that does not fit in. It makes sense that he felt “much closer to the Filipino driver,” seeing as the two of them are both foreigners within an American context. What is wrong about this feeling, however, is that it is internal; there is no external expression of feeling close to the driver or finding his coworker to be foreign. As a result, both the driver and his coworker still consider him an American. Changez in this moment exemplifies an internal struggle of identity, caught between a need to assimilate into American culture for the sake of societal acceptance and the desire to embrace his Pakistani culture and upbringing.

As the company’s time in Manila is nearing end, they receive tragic news from New York City - the Twin Towers have fallen. For days, the men are unable to fly home as a result of cancelled flights. They eventually find a flight back, though Changez may have been better off staying in Manila. There had developed an immediate distrust and hatred directed towards Muslims because of the terrorists’ Islamic background, and Changez quickly began to feel this tension as he entered the plane. He recalls:

My entrance elicited looks of concern from many of my fellow passengers. I flew to New York uncomfortable in my own face: I was aware of being under suspicion; I felt guilty; I tried therefore to be as nonchalant as possible; this naturally led to my becoming stiff and self-conscious (74)

Changez had done nothing wrong. He was born into a respected Pakistani family, graduated from one of the most prestigious universities in the world, and worked for a company that some people could only dream of. In this new America, none of that matters; his skin is brown so he

must be suspicious. Within days of the events of 9/11, Changez is reduced to nothing more than the color of his skin and he knows it. While he has learned to act as an American, he is still “uncomfortable in [his] own face.” There is nothing about his face that resembles society’s idea of an American and, thus, he cannot hide behind the disguise any longer. As a consequence of the suspicions surrounding his presence, Changez “felt guilty” even though he had no actual reason to be. Here, Changez begins to experience life as a Pakistani Muslim in a post 9/11 America. These feelings of being “stiff” and “self-conscious” are, whether or not he realized at the time, not fleeting. They will soon reveal themselves to be omnipresent.

In addition to Changez’s employment at Underwood Samson, his stay in New York City can also be defined by his experience with Erica, a fellow Princeton graduate who he has fallen in love with. Erica is an aspiring writer who struggles with the trauma of her first love’s death, a trauma that follows her at every avenue including her friendship with Changez. As Erica’s relationship with Changez becomes more serious, the two of them attempt to have sex for the first time, but are unsuccessful. They try once more, but Erica is unable to get aroused. Determined to have sex with her, Changez offers up the solution of having her close her eyes while imagining her dead boyfriend as they have sex. The two end up successfully having sex, although the lasting effects are not as intimate. In referring to his solution, Changez comments:

I felt at once both *satiated* and *ashamed*. My satiation was understandable to me; my shame was more confusing. Perhaps, by taking on the persona of another, I had diminished myself in my own eyes; perhaps I was humiliated by the continuing dominance, in the strange romantic triangle of which I found myself a part, of my dead rival; perhaps I was worried that I had acted selfishly (106)

While Changez's satiation is invoked as a result of finally having sex with the woman he is in love with, the satisfaction is nullified by the realization of what he had actually just done. He notes that he feels "*ashamed*" and yet is, for some reason, confused about it. His following comments exhibit a lack of confusion, seeing as he lists off exactly what this sexual encounter has brought out in him. His revelation that he had "diminished himself in [his] own eyes" as a result of "taking on the persona of another" is reminiscent of the persona he took on while in Manila. There is an explicit trend of Changez avoiding his own self in favor of a falsely constructed persona that appeases those who surround him, all while failing to appease his own identity. He is working *for* these people, not with; he changes himself instead of addressing the issues at stake. His statement of "I was humiliated by the continuing dominance, in the strange romantic triangle of which I found myself a part, of my dead rival" is representative of the dominance that Americans have over him. This humiliation can be connected to the relationship between othering and masculinity, as Changez has to over the role of a different man in order to successfully have sex. His own masculinity was not enough for Erica, and this "continuing dominance" only further emasculates him when having to act American in Manila. The sole reason he had acted American in Manila was to assert his dominance over the Filipinos in order to establish a commanding respect, but it is not until this sexual encounter with Erica that he adequately addresses the humiliation of it all.

Later in the story, Changez reflects on this humiliating sexual experience while working on a company project in Chile. During this time, Changez loses the motivation to perform for his company and, more importantly, loses sight of where he is and where he is going. He addresses this uncertainty, reflecting:

I lacked a stable *core*. I was not certain where I belonged – in New York, in Lahore, in both, in neither – and for this reason, when she reached out to me for help, I had nothing of substance to give her. Probably this was why I had been willing to try to take on the persona of Chris, because my own identity was so fragile (148)

Changez's lack of stability in understanding his own identity has effectively blurred any sense of belonging that he may have had. He is a sort of nomad, unable to place himself into a single identity as a consequence of the battle between assimilation and staying true to one's native culture. He reasons with himself about his actions during sex with Erica, concluding that it was because his "own identity was so fragile." The word choice of "fragile" is crucial to note, considering that something fragile breaks easily. His identity has been damaged by having to act American and by the reality of not being American. As much as he can play the part, he is still met with suspicions and disgust over his skin tone and racial background. His urgency to appease others complicates this, as he can only put up this act for so long.

Changez ends up completely letting his team down at Underwood Samson while working in Chile, however he develops an understanding of who he is and what he stands for. He reflects on himself and how his actions have led him to where he is now, and concludes:

There could really be no doubt: I was a modern-day janissary, a servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country with a kinship to mine and was perhaps even colluding to ensure that my own country faced the threat of war. Of course I was struggling! Of course I felt torn! I had thrown in my lot with the men of Underwood Samson, with the officers of the empire, when all along I was predisposed to feel compassion for those, like Juan-Bautista, whose lives the empire thought nothing of overturning for its own gain (152)

Changez has finally developed a feeling of clarity, which is seen through his repetition of “Of course.” He now understands the man he has become, “a servant of the American empire.” He had tried for so long to distinguish himself from the other, all while transforming himself into a servant to the societal majority of both America and New York City. When exhibiting American mannerisms and dominance in Manila, it was Changez who was “overturning for its own gain,” not realizing that he was not actually gaining anything. He was only providing his American counterparts with the tools that *they* needed to become successful. It makes sense then that he exerts feelings of compassion for Juan-Bautista, who worked and lived in Chile without attempting to be someone he is not. With this relation to Juan-Bautista, the “overturning” of man for the other’s gain is inevitable in Changez’s case; when he acted American, he ended up a servant; when he acted himself, he ended up as other.

Bigger Picture of America Following Attacks

In addition to Changez’s life and dinner with the stranger, the novel addresses societal issues on a macroscopic level. Most prominent is one’s perception of the past and their presence in the present. Early in the story, Changez offers his opinion on how people approach history, saying, “Yes, we have acquired a certain familiarity with the recent history of our surroundings, and that – in my humble opinion – allows us to put the present into much better perspective” (45). He does not elaborate on how exactly he is able to “put the present into much better perspective,” making his statement come across as undeveloped. Moreover, Changez does not say what this “better perspective” is or what it alludes to. He later reveals that his own sense of the present had been obscured as a result of his narrow-minded need for financial security, saying:

Yes, I too had previously derived comfort from my firm's exhortations to focus intensely on work, but now I saw that in this constant striving to realize a financial future, no thought was given to the critical personal and political issues that affect one's emotional present. (145)

It is as though he had completely ignored his previous statement about putting the present into perspective through understanding the history of his surroundings. Rather than use the past to support his idea of the present, Changez's reflection shows that his purpose in the present was blurred by a tunnel vision focus on his work at Underwood Samson and his need for a "financial future." By ignoring "the critical personal and political issues that affect one's emotional present," Changez ultimately ignored the assimilation he had undergone and the inevitable process of othering that occurred as a result of the 9/11 attacks. While ignoring these things might work out for someone in the short run, they will eventually become hard to look past.

As Changez reflects on this struggle to approach and understand the present, he provides the stranger with different accounts of how people conceptualize the past. One concept emphasized when thinking about the past is nostalgia, and Changez exhibits a sure awareness of its power. While reflecting on his upbringing and his relatives, he says to the stranger:

As I have already told you, I did not grow up in poverty. But I did grow up with a poor boy's sense of *longing*, in my case not for what my family never had, but for what we had had and lost. Some of my relatives held on to imagined memories the way homeless people hold onto lottery tickets. *Nostalgia* was their crack cocaine (71)

Changez presents this idea of nostalgia with the purpose of conveying his and his relative's lack of certainty in the present. This nostalgic sentiment is not specific to just Changez and his relatives, as he later presents America's relationship with the past:

I had always thought of America as a nation that looked forward; for the first time I was struck by its determination to look *back*...What your fellow countrymen longed for was unclear to me – a time of unquestioned dominance? of safety? of moral certainty? I did not know – but that they were scrambling to don the costumes of another era was apparent (115)

This attachment to the past is problematic in many ways, but most important is the “determination to look *back*” after the attacks on 9/11. America has become a country that lacks the ability to “put the present into much better perspective.” This is reminiscent of Changez’s comments on longing for what they had and lost, which in the case of America, is a sense of security, safety, and dominance. As a result of this longing, Americans have misdirected their anger and attachment to nostalgia, using South Asian Americans as their scapegoat. By othering South Asian Americans, they make the attempt to return to the nostalgic feelings of security and dominance, but doing so only further removes the country from maintaining peace.

In response to the attacks, New York began to shift to a more nationalistic approach that promoted the idea of being American rather than being a New Yorker. Changez brings this up to the stranger, saying:

Your country’s flag invaded New York after the attacks; it was everywhere. Small flags stuck on toothpicks featured in the shrines; stickers of flags adorned windshields and windows large flags fluttered from buildings. They all seemed to proclaim: *We are America* – not New York, which, in my opinion, means something quite different – *the mightiest civilization the world has ever known; you have slighted us; beware our wrath* (79)

Changez's opinion of being American meaning "something quite different" than being a New Yorker bears reminiscence to his own experience in the city. He had previously noted that when he first came to New York to work for Underwood Samson, he was "*immediately* a New Yorker" but still had to force himself to act American in order to gain respect and trust from his peers. This idea of New Yorkers saying "*We are America*" only further others Changez, as American is something he will never be. Likewise, this nationalism has turned the American culture against Changez and his Pakistani heritage even though he has done nothing wrong. Rather than entirely come together as a society, America, as perceived by Changez, has alienated those who do not fit their narrative of what it means to be American and has ultimately developed a sense of being that refuses to look forward. This nationalism and inability to move forward progressively has created an America that is tense and unforgiving, with a disgust directed at the other.

Changez continues discussing the effects 9/11 had on America, further criticizing their lack of foresight and acceptance of the other. In doing so, he ties in issues that America has in using the past to adequately set themselves up for a more promising future. He says to the stranger:

As a society, you were unwilling to reflect upon the shared pain that united you with those who attacked you. You retreated into myths of your own difference, assumptions of your own superiority. And you acted out these beliefs on the stage of the world, so that the entire planet was rocked by the repercussions of your tantrums, not least my family, now facing war thousands of miles away. Such an America had to be stopped in the interests not only of the rest of humanity, but also in your own (168)

He paints a post 9/11 America as one "unwilling to reflect," which consequently prevents the country from moving on progressively in a way that promotes unity instead of hostility. In telling

the stranger, “You retreated into myths of your own difference, assumptions of your own superiority,” Changez implies a stubbornness within Americans that has only divided the country further. As Changez points out, the impact of this stubbornness has affected both America and the other. A change of attitude by the American becomes crucial in redeveloping a sense of both belonging and unity. If one should then define a post 9/11 America as unable to come to terms with their past and future, an America moving forward should consist of a society that works to rebuild what was broken as a result of tension and cultural division. How this progression unfolds will decide the effect that it has on the other and their struggle with self-identity.

As the novel begins to conclude, Changez exerts a full cognizance of the effects othering has had on him as a result of his cultural background and the attacks on 9/11. He understands how it has affected his identity, saying:

Such journeys have convinced me that it is not always possible to restore one’s boundaries after they have been blurred and made permeable by a relationship: try as we might, we cannot reconstitute ourselves as the autonomous beings we previously imagined ourselves to be. Something of us is now outside, and something of the outside is now within us (174)

Changez emphasizes the need for the culture to move forward and accept the present rather than continue their attachment to the past; it is impossible for America to successfully unite if it is unable to come to terms with the need to progress as one. By saying that “Something of us is now outside, and something of the outside is now within us,” Changez unifies the other with the societal majority. They have both been negatively impacted by the attacks and should work together to return to a country that is both strong and open to change. An America moving forward should then promote a cognizance of this impact that looks forward rather than back.

It is appropriate to end the analysis of this novel with the story Erica worked on before her apparent suicide. While Changez was aware that the story was something she had worked on for a while, it was not until after her disappearance that he reads it. He describes it concisely, saying:

It was simply a tale of adventure, of a girl on an island who learns to make do. The narrative shimmered with hope, and although it was for the most part rather spare, it paused often to delight in little details: in the texture of the skin of a piece of fallen fruit, for example, or in the swaying antennae of crayfish in a stream (166)

Rather than dwell on cultural and societal issues, the girl Erica represents can address the world in a way that diffuses tension and “shimmer[s] with hope.” Her tendency to find “delight in little details” does away with the concept of othering. She accepts the varying details of life for what they are, rather than scrutinizing them for being different. She finds what brings her joy and uses this discovery as an outlet for introspection that develops her character into one that is aware of the past but eager to move forward. Conversely, Erica’s story is indicative of the nostalgia and isolationism that is present in Hamid’s conceptualization of the US. Though the girl’s attention to detail helps in eliminating the other, she exhibits an underlying inability or refusal to engage with others. As a result, the hope portrayed within Erica’s story only affects the girl rather than the other. Her introspection may help in the process of doing away with othering but a stronger emphasis must be placed on moving past nostalgia and isolationism. In considering this point on a larger scale, Americans must remove themselves from their fixation on nostalgia and begin to understand that eliminating the concept of the other can only be done so collectively rather than individually.

Disgraced Introduction

In 2012, Pakistani playwright Ayad Akhtar released *Disgraced*, a play similar to *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, following the story of a Pakistani man named Amir and his struggle to develop a concrete identity while living as a lawyer in New York City. *Disgraced* is a one-act play that takes place solely in the Upper East Side apartment that Amir and his girlfriend Emily live in over the course of a few months. Amir describes himself as an apostate, once a Muslim but now detached from his faith. Emily is a white American artist working towards having her work displayed at a highly touted art show, and whose work pays homage to Islamic art and culture. Amir and Emily take issue with each other's relationship with Islam, with Amir neglecting the religion's importance and Emily preaching its influence on art. Aggravating these conflicting arguments on Islam is their dinner with Emily's Jewish art dealer Isaac and his African American wife Jory. The four delve into heated arguments about religion and art over dinner, which brings out an intense anger in Amir that only strengthens his disdain towards both his culture and the culture of those seated around him. Towards the end of the play, Amir learns that Emily has been unfaithful to him with Isaac and retaliates by hitting her. Emily ends up leaving Amir for good and gives him a portrait of himself that she had painted as a last goodbye.

Although Amir claims to not have any affiliation with Islamic tradition, the events that take place throughout the play reveal the influence that Islam still has on him. The play addresses issues of islamophobia and forced assimilation of the other while concurrently developing an appreciation for Islam and the culture so deeply embedded in the faith. Amir himself is a victim of assimilation, and his distaste towards Islam is an explicit consequence of life as the other in a post 9/11 America. While the play might not offer an obvious solution for Amir's actions and response to othering, Akhtar is able to develop his characters and commentary on Islamophobia

and othering in a way that gives the audience the opportunity to address the issues presented on their own. The play creates a post 9/11 environment in one of the wealthiest areas of New York City that shows the extent to which othering affects South Asian Americans and forces the audience to develop their own understanding of what an America moving forward might look like.

Reading a Play

In order to most effectively analyze the play's text, it is important to understand the difference between reading a play and viewing it. In a preface to the text, Akhtar includes a commentary of what it means to read a play. He notes:

A play is seldom meant to be read. It is meant to be pored over, interrogated, dissected, obeyed. A play is a blueprint, a workman's plan drawn for a group of collaborating artists, and it must contain the seeds of inspiration, the insinuations of truth that will spur the actors and the director and the designers handily to tell the playwright's chosen tale. (Akhtar vii)

Though he explains that plays are not written for the purpose of reading, Akhtar asserts that "There can still be a magic to the reader's silent encounter with dialogue on a page" (vii). He says that reading a play "can have the thrill of overheard conversation, the piecing together of circumstance, situation, emotion, the making sense of what we cannot see" (vii). Reading a play may feel "incomplete," yet it opens up an imaginative environment that allows for the reader to draw their own conclusions rather than have the visual aspects of the play spell out the purpose. The same goes for comparing reading a play to reading a novel, as a novel is more complete and is written with the sole purpose of being read. As such, the analysis of this story will be mindful of the things the reader cannot see and of the incompleteness of the director's artistic direction.

Analysis

The play begins with Amir posing for Emily's portrait of him that returns at the end of the story. As she is painting, Amir receives a phone call from his nephew Abe, who is described as "of South Asian origin. But as American as American gets. Vibrant and endearing" (Akhtar 12). This is one of the first instances of cultural assimilation in the play, and compounding this description is Abe's change of name from Hussein to a more American title. After the phone call, Abe ends up at Amir's door, who greets him by saying "Come in, Hussein," refusing to refer to him by his new name. Abe asks Amir to call him by his new name, but is cut off by Amir, who replies, "I've known you your whole life as Hussein. I'm not gonna start calling you Abe now" (13). Just as Abe's change of name reflects a clear need to assimilate into American culture in order to be accepted, Amir's response reflects a subtle attachment to his Pakistani heritage. This attachment should be kept in mind, as it is contradictory to Amir's inability to accept himself for who he is. Amir is angered by Abe's assimilation into American culture, yet he himself has done the same. As such, this interaction between Amir and his nephew reflects conflicting responses to how the other must present themselves in a post 9/11 America, which reveals an internal struggle of identity that is inadequately solved externally.

Amir and Abe continue on in the scene arguing over the name change, which leads Emily to interject and offer her own opinion on Islam that emphasizes its eternal influence on both artistic and societal culture. Abe reasons with Amir, saying, "You know how much easier things are for me since I changed my name? It's in the Quran. It says you can hide your religion if you have to" (13). Amir disagrees with the use of the Quran as justification for Abe changing his name and ignores his argument altogether, though Emily reveals offhand that Amir himself had changed his name. In considering Amir's hypocrisy, Amir comes across as insecure about the

religion he once held faith in. It is ironic that Amir can change his own name while still getting mad at Abe for doing the same, and Amir is unable to come to terms with own assimilation and native background as a result of his othering. As Emily interjects her own opinion into the conversation, Amir says to her, “I don’t understand what you see in it,” referring to Islam (18). She reminds him of their time at a mosque in Cordoba and how being there had “actually made [him] feel like praying” (19). Amir agrees with her comment but continues to deflect any appreciation for Islam, to which Emily replies, “There’s so much beauty and wisdom in the Islamic tradition” (19). The scene presents the audience with two conflicting opinions of Islamic culture: a Pakistani’s neglect of cultural influence and an American’s admiration of its importance. In a post 9/11 America, one would assume that these roles should be reversed. The fact that they are not shows the extent to which South Asian Americans have been negatively affected by othering through an assimilation that takes control of their true identity. While Emily’s comments reflect an ignorance towards the internal struggles of South Asian Americans in a post 9/11 context, it is more reasonable to address this conflict of interest from the point of view that places Amir in an environment that welcomes him and his Pakistani background.

Amir voices his issues with his family’s intertwined relationship with America and Islam, exhibiting a misdirected anger towards their refusal to assimilate into American culture in the same way that he has. As he explains his annoyance, he says to Emily:

It will never cease to amaze me. My parents move to this country with my sister, never make her a citizen. When she’s old enough? They send her back, marry her off in Pakistan. She has kids with the guy, and lo and behold—he wants to come here. And what do they do? Spend all their spare time at an Islamic center. (20)

Aware of it or not, Amir's "amazement" is representative of the effects that assimilating into American culture has had on him. He is unable to grasp the idea of his sister and her husband coming to America only to "spend all their spare time at an Islamic center." He appears incapable of appreciating his cultural background and exhibits a lack of understanding as to why someone would adhere to his or her own culture while in foreign territory. He expects his sister and her husband to assimilate into American culture and remove themselves from the process of othering, which displays the overtaking effects of a post 9/11 society. There is no reason for him to find their attachment to Islam so problematic, seeing as it does not directly affect him. He is directing his own insecurities and inability to come to terms with his identity towards those who *are* comfortable in who they are, which only furthers his loss of identity as a result of assimilation into American culture.

The reason Abe had called Amir and showed up to his apartment was to ask for Amir's support as a lawyer to support a potential exoneration of a Muslim man's prison sentence. Amir eventually shows up to the prison to talk to the man but does not offer any substantial help in fear of being associated by his coworkers with someone aiming to support a man whose cultural background has been othered as a consequence of 9/11. In opposition to Amir's reluctance to help the man, Emily once again provides him with a voice of reason from the perspective of an American. Amir comments that the man had "spent an hour trying to get [him] to pray again" to which she replies, "So what? So a man who has nothing left but his dignity and his faith is trying to be useful in the only way he knows how?" (20-21). Amir approaches the man's use of religion as comfort in the same way that he finds amazement in his sister's use of her free time in an Islamic center, with a disdain and reluctance to understand why they cannot assimilate into an American culture void of attachment to Islamic faith. He claims that he is not one of the man's

“own people” but is met with a rebuttal from Emily who says, “You are. And in a way that’s unique. And that can be helpful to him. Why can’t you see that?” (21). Rather than continue the conversation, Amir resorts to pleading, “Can we stop talking about this?” (21). There is a growing trend of Amir refusing to confront the issues he has with those who embrace their culture instead of assimilating into another. He has taken his own assimilation so far to the point that he exerts an inability to approach peoples’ response to the process of othering. Considering that he is Pakistani and once associated himself with Islam, it would be reasonable for him to understand the use of religion as comfort in foreign land, but his own reaction to othering is so strong that it blocks him from accepting those who refuse to assimilate. His own identity has become so misconstrued by othering and assimilation to the point that he is perplexed by those who find strength in who they are by means of faith.

The New York Times takes note of Amir’s conversation with the imprisoned Muslim, publishing an article that details their talk. As expected, based on his previous behavior, Amir’s reaction to the article does not concern the topic of conversation but rather the possibility that readers will conclude that he is Muslim. He attempts to reassure himself, saying, “I guess they’ll look at the name; if they know anything at all – they’ll know the name isn’t Muslim” (24). Although he acknowledges that his statements in the article were in fact what he said to the man, Amir still struggles with being associated with a Muslim. Moreover, rather than being proud of helping a man in need, Amir is upset that the law firm he represents is specified in the Times and rhetorically asks Emily, “Why did they have to mention the firm?” (25). His fixation on maintaining an American identity void of his native background reifies the effects of assimilation, which leaves him concerned solely about the effects that associating with the other have on his status as an established lawyer in New York City. Amir exhibits a clear lack of

sympathy for the other that only furthers the divide between his identity and the culture that raised him. As a product of assimilation, Amir turns his back on the other and fails to consider peoples' actions from a point of view other than his own.

Later in the play, Isaac shows up to their apartment to talk with Emily about a prior discussion they had regarding her art. He notes that he has “spent a lot of time thinking about” the talk they had but does not go into specifics (29). Emily hastily asks for clarification, responding, “About me being a white woman with no right to be using Islamic forms?” (29). There are no laws, Islamic or governmental, that state that a non-Muslim cannot interpolate Islamic forms of art into their own, so Isaac was instead accusing her of appropriating Islamic culture. Isaac is wrong in saying this to her and Emily quickly rebuts an explanation as to why it is appreciation and respect rather than appropriation. She says to Isaac, “The Muslims gave us Aristotle. Without them, we probably wouldn’t even have visual perspective” (30). If this is the case, then Emily has every right to use Islamic forms in her artwork since their influence is deeply rooted in the practice’s inception. She continues to elaborate on the importance of Islamic art, saying:

The Islamic tiling tradition, Isaac? Is a doorway to the most extraordinary freedom. And which only comes through a profound submission. In my case, of course it’s not submission to Islam but to the formal language. (30)

This “extraordinary freedom” Emily describes goes against the assimilation that Amir has undergone yet reflects the ability of his sister and her husband to go to an Islamic center in America without any urge to succumb to the othering process. Amir’s assimilation into American culture has narrowed his view on this freedom, to the point where he does not believe it even exists. Although Emily is referring to art, one can extrapolate this expression of freedom

to the Islamic tradition as a whole; Amir's sister feels no need to indulge herself in American culture and has the freedom to continue on with her life in a way that stays true to her Pakistani heritage. As Emily ends her argument for using Islamic forms in her own art, she says, "It's time we woke up. Time we stop paying lip service to Islam and Islamic art. We draw on the Greeks, the Romans... but Islam is part of who we are, too" (32). Her repetition of "we" instead of a personal "you" allows for her point to be universally applicable, not just to art or Isaac but to society altogether. She exhibits a cognizance of unwarranted Islamic slander and vocalizes her internal appreciation for the religion and its influence, which ultimately develops a dichotomy of thought between her, Isaac, and Amir. While Isaac fixated his criticisms on her appropriation of Islamic art forms, Emily shows him why he is wrong. Likewise, while Amir takes issue with the religion and the essence it brings in a post 9/11 America, Emily preaches the freedom and influence it has had not just on Muslims but everyone of any faith.

After listening to Emily's remarks, Isaac exhibits an almost immediate change of mind on her use of Islamic art forms and begins to regurgitate her points back to Amir. Before Amir can even comment on what Emily said, Isaac butts in and says:

What she's doing with the Islamic tradition has taken her to another level. A young Western painter drawing on Islamic representation? Not ironically? But in service? It's an unusual and remarkable statement. (47)

Although Isaac has good intentions, it is curious that he felt the need to clarify that her work was done unironically. While the success of some art pieces could be attributed to its use of ironic effect, it does not make sense in this specific case, and Isaac's idea that it might have been done ironically shows that he does not entirely understand the use of another culture's art forms. Regardless, Isaac exhibits a growing ability to contextualize the influence of Islam in art that is

more willing to understand and learn than Amir's point of view. In response to Isaac, Amir questions the ideas posed, asking, "What's the statement?" (47). Just as Emily previously emphasized "we" when talking about the influence of Islam, Isaac responds, "Islam is rich and universal. Part of a spiritual and artistic heritage we can all draw from" (47). The universality of Islam is expanded on and emphasized as Emily adds on to Isaac's point, saying:

The Renaissance is when we turned away from something bigger than ourselves. It put the individual at the center of the universe and made a cult out of the personal ego... That never happened in the Islamic tradition. It's still more connected to a wider, less personal perspective. (47)

In highlighting Islam's "wider" and "universal" impact, Isaac and Emily inadvertently draw out Amir's problematic relationship with the religion and its culture. Despite the omnipresent influence that Islam can hold on society, Amir refuses to accept the positive impact that the faith has had on culture. His assimilation into American culture has deterred him away from believing that Islam exhibits any importance on society, which has resulted in a narrowminded assumption that everything he does is the right way, and that everything he does is void of any outside influence beyond American culture. Consequently, Amir's point of view will only further blur his own sense of identity and will likewise only deaden any possibility of coming to terms with himself in a society attempting to grow out of its post 9/11 tendencies and opinions.

In the next scene of the play, Amir, Emily, Isaac, and Jory discuss over dinner their opinions on race and religion that quickly transforms into a heated argument between the four of them. Isaac mentions that he is flying to Delhi soon to visit an art studio and then directs the conversation towards a discussion of airports. Out of curiosity, Isaac asks Amir what his airport experiences are like, subtly alluding to his position as a Pakistani. After he asks the question, the

script denotes that there is an “Awkward beat,” which gives off the impression that the question was one better off not said (49). Regardless, Amir delves into his airport experiences and reveals that he volunteers to be searched by TSA every time he goes rather than wait for them to ask. Emily responds by saying, “Those agents are working hard not to discriminate...Then here’s this guy who comes up to them and calls them out” (50). By volunteering to be searched, Amir only concretizes the identity of the other that he has worked so hard to distance himself from. He takes issue with being associated with a Muslim man in the New York Times but obstructs his own identity through his need to ask to be searched, as if he is playing victim to a cause that has does not exist. It is very possible that Amir can go through airport security without being stopped for a search, so him voluntarily doing it makes a problem out of potentially false pretenses.

Unlike Isaac and Emily, who find Amir’s comments off-putting, Jory expresses a sort of respect for his actions. She adds, “I think it’s kind of admirable, Amir. If everyone was so forthcoming, the world would be a very different place” (50). She does not say whether this “very different place” is better or worse than the present, but her specification of his action’s being “admirable” lean towards the former, which is a problematic conclusion on her behalf to make. Her word choice of “forthcoming” expresses the notion that these people would be readily willing to volunteer, but a world where *everyone* is forthcoming is rather a depiction of forced assimilation. The need for everyone to be forthcoming represents a universal lack of trust in the system and in society, as if no one is really safe. Isaac defers, stating that “It’s racial profiling” (50). Jory replies, “Honey. I know what it is,” even though she had just said what Amir does is admirable, which raises the question of exactly what point she is trying to make (50). Intentional or not, Jory is alluding to an admiration for succumbing to racial profiling as if it makes the security process easier for the masses; she is more focused on the process of security rather than

the process of othering that it reaffirms. Isaac goes on to say, “I mean, if we all got used to that kind of... compliance? We might actually start getting a little too comfortable about our suspicions” (50). Since Isaac says “we” and “our,” Amir feels compelled to ask him if he has his own suspicions, to which Isaac replies, “I mean, not me, I’m just saying—” (50). If Isaac claims that he is not part of the “we” he refers to, it is odd that he would use that phrasing over a less inclusive term such as “them.” In considering Isaac and Jory’s responses to this compliance then, the two of them exert subtle allusions to the reservations they have regarding racial profiling and assimilation; they do not explicitly condemn these topics and elude any formal conclusions of what they truly believe.

As the discussion at dinner moves on, Amir begins to express his beliefs that Muslims are different from anyone else. He does so emphatically, which leaves Isaac confused and ready to argue. In response to Amir’s comments, Isaac says:

See, this is the problem I’m having... You’re saying Muslims are so different. You’re not that different. You have the same idea of the good life as I do. I wouldn’t have even known you were a Muslim if it wasn’t for the article in the Times. (56)

His point of Muslims having “the same idea of the good life,” is reminiscent of Amir’s sister and her husband. Despite living in America, the two of them found comfort in going to an Islamic center and to them that was a good life. People can live this good life however they want - there is not one specific life that is agreed upon to be the best, it is the *idea* of the good life that matters. Amir was unable to understand this. He had been so assimilated into American culture to the point that he believed it was the only path to a good life and took this belief out on those who approached their environments differently, going as far to express amazement at his sister finding comfort and the good life on her own terms. It is also interesting to point out Isaac’s

reference to the Times article considering how Amir changed his name and figured that having it published in the article would act as sort of proof that he is not a Muslim. As much as Amir can do to detach himself from his Pakistani and Muslim background, it will always be part of who he is. If all it took was words on paper for Isaac to find out that Amir was (or had been) a Muslim, it seems that Amir's personality constructed by othering was pointless. He must come to terms with his background and understand that, at the end of the day, his true identity is not that far from anyone else's and that he cannot run from who he is.

In the next scene, Abe returns and gets into an argument with Amir who expressed anger over Abe's vehement embracement of Islam. Amir begins to interrogate Abe with hostility, saying "So now you think running around with a kufi on your head, shooting your mouth off in Starbucks, or sitting in a mosque and bemoaning the plight of Muslims around the world is going to—" (84). Abe cuts him off before Amir can finish his point, interrupting with:

It's disgusting. The one thing I can be sure about with you? You'll always turn on your own people. You think it makes these people like you more when you do that? They don't. They just think you hate yourself. And they're right! You do! (84)

In just a few sentences, Abe vocalizes a representation of the man Amir has become in a post 9/11 America. Amir has turned on his own people, whether it be his lack of remorse for the imprisoned Muslim or his own sister, in favor of a version of himself that he thinks is right. His assimilation into American culture was done in order to gain the trust and respect of his peers to little effect. As Abe points out, these people do not like Amir any more for his attempts at being like them, so it is as if his need to stray away from his own culture was pointless. It makes sense then that Abe says Amir hates himself. Amir had created a false identity for himself that was so eager to detach itself from who he really is, and as a result, his sense of self became so

misconstrued to the point of refusing to believe that there was any other way besides his to achieve a good life. The post 9/11 America had effectively blurred Amir's idea of who he is, and it was not until Abe spoke out that he began to understand the stranger he had become. Abe continues to force his point on the negative effects of assimilation and othering, stating:

For three hundred years they've been taking our land, drawing new borders, replacing our laws, making us want to be like them. Look like them. Marry their women. They disgraced us. They disgraced us. (84)

In a similar way to how he described Amir's character, Abe emotionally explains how the other actually feels in a post 9/11 America that is driven by the need for assimilation. His anger is completely justified; assimilation forces a misconception of what the good life is and transforms the other into someone they are not, someone that loses the ability to think for themselves, and someone who is unable to return to the person they once were. If the other wishes to succeed in a society built upon assimilation, they must disrupt the cultural norms being imposed and understand that they do not need to satisfy anyone but themselves. After all, the good life is a life that focuses on what *you* like, who *you* are, not what *they* like, who *they* are.

The last scene of the play takes place six months later. Amir and Emily's relationship has ended, and Amir is preparing to move out of the apartment. Emily shows up unannounced with Abe and leaves Amir with the portrait she painted of him at the beginning of the play. The portrait is an interpolation of the "Portrait of Juan de Pareja," using Amir in place of Juan. It was originally painted by Diego Velazquez, to whom Juan de Pareja was a slave for. As Amir unwraps the painting and realizes that it is the portrait of him, the stage directions state, "*He takes a searching long look*" (87). The lights cut out as Amir reflects on the painting and the play ends.

When the audience was first introduced to the painting at the beginning of the play, Emily talks about the original piece, saying, “I started to think about the Velazquez painting. And how people must have reacted when they first saw it. They think they’re looking at a picture of a Moor. An Assistant” (7). The idea of people’s reaction to a painting of a Moor coincides with the reaction to seeing the other. At face value, there does not appear to be much to appreciate when looking at a Moor or an other. After Amir clarifies that it is a painting of a slave, Emily states why the portrait is more important than one of royalty, saying that the slave’s portrait “has more nuance and complexity than his renditions of kings and queens” (7). At the time Emily painted the portrait, Amir had taken up the persona of a slave, though not in the exact way that Juan de Pareja was. Amir was a slave to othering and assimilation, caught up in satisfying the societal majority of America that prevented him from being free. He had thrived to attain the same respect that “kings and queens” have, not realizing that his position as the other “has more nuance and complexity.” He had found his position as the other to be not good enough, and now this final reflection gives him the opportunity to truly see how detrimental the manipulative process of othering was on him. Just as Juan de Pareja did not try to become a slave, Amir did not wake up one day and tell himself he will be othered. It was both out of their control, which Amir must understand in order to accept his nuances and complexities for what they are. The portrait then is representative of hope. Even though people may see the portrait and not give it much thought since it’s not of a king or queen, Amir can look at the portrait and learn what makes him stand out over the rest. He can learn to embrace these complexities and respect them more than the qualities of royalty, which will ultimately allow for his removal from assimilation in favor of a life that is unique and just as important as a king’s.

Interview with Author

Following the play's text, Akhtar includes an interview he gave regarding a London production of the play. The interviewer concludes the conversation by asking Akhtar, "What are the thoughts that you leave young Muslims with about this play?" (96). Akhtar begins his response by stating, "It's a problematic, complex, deeply troubling play" and goes on to address the role that "Western consciousness" has in "representing a Muslim subject" (96). He notes that Amir's character arc throughout the play "has to do with the ways in which we Muslims are still beholden on an ontological level to the ways in which the West is seeing us" (96). In concluding his response, Akhtar says:

"I *do* believe personally that the Muslim world has got to fully account for the image the West has of it and move on. To the extent that we continue to try to define ourselves by saying, 'We are *not* what you say about us,' we're still allowing someone else to have the dominant voice in the discourse" (96).

Amir himself is a victim of this lack of dominance in discourse, as seen by the conversation he has with Abe. While Abe sticks to what he believes in, Amir is fixated on the "Western consciousness" and allows it to drive his personality even if he believes that he is acting progressively. He believes that his idea of identity is correct, all while ignoring the lingering dominance of Western consciousness. If Amir is to honestly say that he is not what Western consciousness says he is, he must "move on" and assert his own dominance into the discourse without any outside influence.

Chapter 3

A Comparative Analysis of Expression

Comparative Analysis

Although Nas does not directly address issues regarding the othering of South Asian Americans in his song “Cops Shot the Kid,” his work can still be applied to both *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Disgraced*. In comparing these works, the most effective way to formulate this projection would be to analyze the endings of each. These works have different endings, but a comparative analysis produces a coherent and fluid conclusion representative of each piece alone and altogether.

As “Cops Shot the Kid” comes to an end, the same looping of the Slick Rick sample plays, although this time Kanye West provides ad-libs in between each line. During the first four instances in which the Slick Rick sample is cut off (i.e., “Cops shot the kid, the cops shot--”) West creates a short, albeit powerful story of an unnamed man making do with what he has in order to live his best life. West first introduces this man, noting that he has been “Workin’ nine-to-five” which portrays him as a man that places emphasis on a hardworking attitude (Nas 2:24). There is nothing about this man at first that stands out, but then West interjects the next line with “Tryna stay alive” (2:25). In using the word “tryna,” or “trying to,” West implies that this man is making a conscious effort to stay alive, as if death is waiting for him to slip up. The third ad-lib recorded by West is “Makin ends meet,” which furthers the characterization of the man as someone who works day to day, paycheck to paycheck (2:28). The story of the man comes to an abrupt closing, with West’s last interjection of “Shot him this week” (2:30). While West does not say who shot the man, the ever-looping Slick Rick sample is there to remind the listener right away who shot him: the cops. The loop continues to play with an underlying distorted layer, and

the song ends with the echoing screech that had already presented itself multiple times throughout the instrumental.

The song's closing leaves the listener with an understanding of the status quo of the other, and the problems that they face. The status quo is defined by the normality of unwarranted and racially motivated killings of African Americans by police officers. More generally, the song develops a status quo that *expects* othering to happen, and that *expects* a lack of care or urgency to change from the perspective of the societal majority. The problem with this is expressed by the song's ending of "I still hear him scream," which asserts that the racial discrimination brought out by othering has a lasting effect (2:39). Moreover, the echoes of the scream at the end allude to the racially charged attitudes of the killers continuing on, regardless of whether or not the song ends here. In considering this, the scream at the end can represent a call for action, as if it is a scream of protest rather than a scream of terror or murder.

In comparing the song to *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Disgraced*, the expression of emotions between the two works are understood on different terms, but function in similar ways. For example, when thinking about the general status quo raised in "Cops Shot the Kid" through the lens of *Disgraced*, one can see that Amir is a victim of the expectations that are embedded within the *status quo* of othering. When at the airport, Amir anticipates being othered by TSA agents and volunteers himself to be searched every time when going through security. This anticipation only reifies the extent to which othering has an impact on people and does more harm to Amir than good. On a similar note, Changez anticipates being othered due to his Pakistani background and attempts to avoid it through assimilating into an American culture void of his own heritage and tradition. Both characters accept the status quo and ultimately allow for the process of othering to continue as a consequence.

Since Nas's song does not address the othering of South Asian Americans, listening to the song alongside *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Disgraced* allows for a strengthened development of how the other should go about ridding society of racial discrimination and forced assimilation in a post 9/11 America. Feelings of uncertainty are present in the endings of each work, and it is crucial to compare such expressions to extrapolate the purpose of a lack of closure within each piece. Where "Cops Shot the Kid" does not explicitly offer a solution to the problem of the status quo, these two literary works dictate how the other should act on the issues in a productive way that uses uncertainty to their advantage. If the listener is to conclude that the echoing screech at the end of the song is representative of a call for action, these two stories elaborate on exactly what action needs to take place.

This elaboration takes place during the ending of each story, which leaves the result unknown but the purpose clear and understood. When Changez talks to the stranger about his time as an instructor in Pakistan, he recalls his expression of oppression and anger on international television, stating to the camera that "No country inflicts death so readily upon the inhabitants of other countries, frightens so many people so far away, as America" (Hamid 182). Putting this in conversation with *Disgraced*, Abe's response to the pain inflicted on the other by America is puzzled, as he questions "And then they pretend they don't understand the rage we've got?" (Akhtar 85). While Changez actively participates in protests that call for a change in how his culture is treated by America, Abe proudly embraces his Muslim background while still in New York. Both of these endings offer a solution to the problem presented in "Cops Shot the Kid," promoting an America moving forward that is grounded upon the regaining of identity and outward pride that had not been previously vocalized or easily identifiable. The solution involves

external action, as simply just solving the issue internally drives no purpose that can affect change on a grander scale.

The externalization of action is not always a simple task, and the process of it is sometimes reduced to a fleeting thought that might never be acted upon. In “Flag Shopping,” Heems expresses his emotions regarding the horrors of witnessing the attacks on 9/11, but the process of othering is too strong for him to return to normal. Consequently, Heems internalizes his issues with othering while showcasing a false external sense of pride in his country by means of going shopping for American flags. This internalization of struggle can be seen in the same way in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, *Disgraced*, and in an episode of the TV show *Ramy*.

When Changez goes to Manila and acts as if he is American by means of mannerisms and speech, he follows the same pattern of Heems and his internalization of struggle that results in an external false pride. It is not that Changez finds this American façade more enticing and fulfilling than being his own true self, but rather that he believes this American persona to build both respect from the Manila workers and comradery with his American counterparts. This comradery is based on a false pretense, however, and the reality of it can be traced back to Abe’s comments to Amir in *Disgraced* when explaining that Amir’s detachment from Pakistani culture has only made his American counterparts think he hates himself. Since the comradery is not genuine, it raises the question of why Heems even bothers to put up an American flag.

In each of these works, the male protagonist is seen to experience the effects of the proliferation of American flags following the attacks. The male perspective of this proliferation returns to the relationship between othering and masculinity, as if raising a flag makes them immune to emasculation. When Changez is talking to the stranger about the American flags that began to show up everywhere in New York City following the attacks, he sees the proliferation

as a statement that says, “*We are America ... the mightiest civilization the world has ever known; you have slighted us; beware our wrath*” (Hamid 79). This statement places a dominance over Changez, like how his sexual experience with Erica allowed for her deceased boyfriend to have power over him. Just as Changez had to take over the persona of Erica’s deceased boyfriend to feel accepted, the raising of flags puts Changez in a position where he feels inclined to follow suit if he wishes to avoid further othering.

The fourth episode of Ramy Youssef’s *Ramy*, titled “Strawberries,” also elaborates on the effects that the proliferation of American flags had on the other, though this time the impact is seen visually rather than through text. In this episode, Ramy flashes back to his experience as a middle-school aged Muslim living in New Jersey when the attacks on 9/11 took place. In the morning following the attacks, Ramy’s father goes outside their house wearing his work clothes and with a drill in his hand (Ramy 11:15). He drills in a flag holder and raises an American flag as one of his White neighbors walks by, to whom he waves at with a big smile. The neighbor turns his head and gets into his car disgruntledly, leaving Ramy’s father visually angry as he forcefully picks up the flag’s box and barges back indoors. This encounter is reminiscent of the previously mentioned disingenuous comradery that Changez had experienced while working alongside other men in Manila. Ramy’s father makes the attempt at maintaining this comradery with his White neighbor, but both of their reactions to the newly placed flag prove that the attempt holds no real value. The main premise of the episode focuses on Ramy’s experience with masculinity, so the directorial choice to include this scene with his father is not a coincidence. The lack of approval by the White neighbor exhibits a dominance over Ramy’s father, which consequently emasculates him and keeps him in the realm of the other.

It is important for the other to express and talk through their struggles they have dealt with as a result of the discrimination that followed the attacks on 9/11 and to also recognize how the attacks and ensuing social climate have changed them and their identity. In “Flag Shopping” and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Heems and Changez exhibit an awareness of the change in both their lifestyle and how they are treated by the general population, while the ending of *Disgraced* alludes to Amir’s later understanding of such. Heems is upfront about his situation, rapping in the final verse of the song, “And I’ll never be the same / Never ever be the same” (Heems 2:36). Returning to life as if nothing had ever happened is not an option for Heems, leaving it up to him to make amends with the past in order for him to figure out how exactly he can carry in a way that looks back in order to move forward. Rather than refuse to believe that he has changed, Heems accepts his new life for what it is. Changez takes this cognizance one step forward, using his change of character as inspiration to fight and protest for what he believes in. Less explicitly, Amir receives a portrait of himself painted by Emily done at the beginning of the play and is given the opportunity to reflect on how 9/11 changed him and how he can approach this change in a way that maintains his true sense of identity. In addressing these points in terms of a post 9/11 America moving forward, their expressions of and reflections on change provide them with the tools needed to survive in a rapidly changing country that still perceives them as other. At a time when the three of them feel as if their identity has been blurred through the process of othering and assimilation into American culture, it is imperative that they directly interrogate their identities in a way that questions their change and that attempts to resolve the destruction of self. If they can accept the impact of 9/11, they can then work rediscovering who they are on their own terms and not on the country’s terms.

In comparing Heems's "Patriot Act" to *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Disgraced*, the topic of assimilation and suspicion become prevalent. Heems ends this song with a story of how the FBI harassed one of his father's friends so vehemently that he packed up and left the United States. He attempts to make amends with this idea, saying "I guess it's okay because my dad wasn't deported / And I still get to correct his English at dinner / So he doesn't raise too much attention and get labeled a troublemaker" (3:36). The tone of his voice is not hopeful, and he is rather disgusted at the idea of having to continue assimilating his father into American culture in order to not raise suspicions by the government and society as a whole. The suspicions Heems is trying to avoid are personified in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, seen most explicitly during Changez's discussion over dinner with the stranger. Changez presents himself as a Pakistani, rid of the American personality he portrayed himself as in New York and is met with constant concern by the stranger as to whether he is to be trusted or not. Even as Changez reassures the stranger that he can be trusted and that there is no danger present, the stranger struggles to look past the racial identity of Changez. Similarly, in *Disgraced*, Amir takes issue with Abe wearing a Kufi and bemoaning about the struggles of being Muslim, worried that Abe will draw suspicion from the wrong people. Abe reminds Amir that "The Prophet wouldn't be trying to be like one of them. He didn't conquer the world by copying other people" (Akhtar 84). The pressure of assimilation and the importance of maintaining one's own identity put these characters, and anyone who has been othered, at a crossroads. Consequently, how their experience in a post-post 9/11 world goes is up to them. They can either continue their assimilation and othering, such as how Heems continues to correct his father's English, or they can escape these false identities through embracing their culture without concerning themselves with American social norms that have been imposed on foreigners.

Conclusion

The analysis of hip-hop and South Asian literature on their own and in comparison brings out a perspective on the other that establishes how an America moving forward is defined. Each work developed a unique point of view that approached different ways of understanding what the other is and how the other should act in order to thwart the denotation. Nas's "Cops Shot the Kid" began the hip-hop analysis from the perspective of the African American and focused on the brutal effects that discrimination has on the other. Heems's "Flag Shopping" concerned itself with the plight of the other in having to assimilate into the majority's culture in order to fit in, be accepted, and hopefully avoid baseless assumptions driven by distasteful racial attitudes. Likewise, "Patriot Act" directed a point of view of the other that similarly addressed assimilation but through a more personal lens that strengthened the pathos of the song. Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* confronted the issues that others have with self-identity as a result of assimilation, highlighting how quickly one can lose their sense of being when they attempt to appease the majority. Lastly, Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced* depicted the other as one whose loss of identity dismantled their understanding of how one should live.

There is not one specific way to describe what an America moving forward will look like. An America beyond 9/11 will be one of choice. The other can choose how they wish to live, as long as they truly believe in it. This belief, however, may blur the identities of South Asian Americans. The forced assimilation they endure as a result of systemic racism has produced an effect that places them at odds with which culture they most identify with. It appears inevitable though, that this blur in identity will only be temporary. At some point, those who have been othered will be forced to interrogate their identity and decide what type of person they really wish to be. In doing so, they must examine themselves from their own perspective rather than

from that of the group or culture that had isolated them in the first place. They must rid themselves of the effects of discrimination and work to empower their identity in a way that leaves them feeling both comfortable and confident in who they are. An America moving forward does not dictate any certain way of living, but rather it forces the other to look inward to rediscover what it means to be true to oneself. Instead of dwelling over the past, an America moving forward uses the past as a point of synthesis, ultimately hoping to reach a sense of identity that feels like home no matter how far away home might be.

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